

## Ethics, Globalization and Intercultural Communication

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**Abstract:** Ethics and intercultural communication are usually discussed in terms of cultural relativity, identity issues and communication and/ or value systems. In response to our ethical responsibility as communication scholars, a model developed by the author over the last 15 years is introduced. This model explains why and how different types of ethical dilemmas arise in today's complex global information and communication system, which is increasingly dominated by the Internet and social media (Vaagan 2010, 2011, 2015)

The model, while reflecting a mainly Western vantage point, can have wider significance since it challenges and invites also non-Western perspectives, and thereby can contribute to theorizing and fruitful discussion regarding global intercultural communication and dialogue.

**Keywords:** Ethics, globalization, information and communication technology (ICT), information systems, intercultural communication, values

### 1. Introduction

Dear chair of the organizing committee Dr. Xing Lu, dear President of DePaul University Dr. A. Gabriel Esteban, dear Dean of the College of Communication Dr. Salma Ghanem, dear members and officers of IAICS, conference participants, keynote speakers, colleagues and friends. Thank you for your kind words of welcome!

This is the 24<sup>th</sup> conference of IAICS and we are delighted to be here at DePaul University in Chicago. One year ago at our 23<sup>rd</sup> conference in Macao, Dean Salma Ghanem and Assistant Dean Shena Ramsay presented DePaul University as the host of our 24<sup>th</sup> conference, and they assured us that they were ready from day one. Shortly afterwards a conference website was in place, an organizing committee was set up and a Call for papers was distributed. The impressive program that has been arranged with meticulous care counts roughly 250 abstracts on a wide range of issues, all addressing the conference theme "Communication and Dialogue: Integrating Global Communities".

### 2. IAICS

Our association today counts 180 members from 25 countries. Since becoming President one year ago, I have had the privilege of cooperating closely with the Board of Directors, with our Executive Director Professor Sihui Mao and other distinguished IAICS officers. In my first year as President we have together restructured the Board of Directors, we have brought in some new board members including Professor Salma Ghanem, and we have agreed on a location for

next year's conference in 2019 in the Czech Republic. Next year will therefore be the first time an IAICS conference will be hosted in Europe. Not least we have recently elected Professor Margaret D'Silva as President Elect 2019-21. Our journal *Intercultural Communication Studies* is edited in Macao by Professor Joanna Radwańska-Williams, and our conference website with free back issues of our journal, has since 2014 been hosted by The University of Rhode Island by my predecessor as President, Professor Guo-Ming Chen.

## 2.1. IAICS Conference Goals

The goals of our conferences are:

- To bring together international educators and scholars to share ideas and experiences from diverse interdisciplinary perspectives on communication across cultures.
- To provide a forum for the exchange of scholarly research on issues relating to communication across language and culture.
- To disseminate through monographs, journals and websites recent research and thinking on emerging issues relating to language and culture.
- To bring different academic disciplines together to share theoretical insights and findings about communication across cultures.

## 2.2. 24<sup>th</sup> Conference Theme

The conference theme is *Communication and Dialogue: Integrating Global Communities*. This theme will be addressed over the next few days by representatives from no less than 42 countries attending this conference. Several distinguished keynote speakers and around 250 presentations in the parallel sessions will all realize the goals of the IAICS conferences mentioned earlier. The Call for Papers notes the existence of two opposing perspectives on globalization. One that promotes diversity, interconnectedness and interdependence through open borders and intercultural collaboration as the antidote to the global problems of inequality, terrorism, and climate change. Not all subscribe to this notion, there is another, more harmful, view characterized by ethnocentrism, prejudice, xenophobia and implicit biases causing fear, exclusion, alienation, divisiveness and violence. The Call challenges us as communication scholars to address these issues; it is our ethical responsibility to identify, analyze and provide strategies and solutions to these problems. Indeed, the notion of "ethical responsibility" is an inherent part of the Vincentian mission of DePaul University, and something I shall discuss with you this afternoon. Let me just say a few words first on the concept of "community" and how to create inclusive and integrated global communities by engaging intercultural and trans-border dialogues. Integration of communities requires humanity to come together through compassion, empathy, shared values, common interests and full participation of all people while acknowledging and respecting cultural differences. By sharing research from diverse interdisciplinary perspectives on intercultural and international issues, we can generate new ideas, new ways of thinking and collective wisdom toward a brighter future.

### 3. Community

A community is often described as a social group of any size whose members reside in a specific locality, share government, and often have a common cultural and historical heritage. In contemporary research in sociology and culture studies, there are multiple approaches to and interpretations of the term “community” (Jacobs, 2015, p.361). The Chicago School of the 1920s and 1930s made a significant contribution to urban sociology. Later, one of the world’s most cited communication scholars - the Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells - was credited by some for introducing the concept of “global community”. His trilogy on ‘the network society’ of the late 1990s foresaw that the new globalized and customized mass media permeate all levels of society, and directly affect individuals, local communities and a large part of the global community alike. In his book *Communication Power* (2009) he introduced the concept of “mass self-communication”, arguing that the Internet and social media now allow us to go beyond the one-to-many communication of traditional media to the many-to-many communication we see today.

In response to this call, my presentation attempts to address a few of the issues raised.

### 4. Ethics

Ethics is far from a new topic in intercultural communication (Ploder, 2015). One of the most popular textbooks on intercultural communication is Larry A. Samovar et al. (2015). *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*. It consists of 9 chapters with the 44 most «foundational» articles of the last 40 years, selected from more than 600 essays that have appeared in previous editions since the first publication in 1972.

Ethics, globalization and intercultural communication are often discussed in terms of cultural relativity, identity issues and communication and/or value systems (Cleveland, 2015; Evanoff, 2015; Kale, 2015; Young, 2015). I would like to share with some reflections on a model of ethics I have been working with over the last 20 years. This model tries to explain why and how different types of ethical dilemmas arise in today’s complex global information and communication system, which is increasingly dominated by information and communication technology (ICT), including the Internet and social media (Vaagan, 2010, 2011, 2015). The model, while reflecting a mainly Western vantage point, can have wider significance since it invites non-Western perspectives, and thereby can contribute to theorizing and fruitful discussion on global intercultural communication and dialogue.

Ethics is very much in fashion today in the West. Many professional associations have codes of ethics or codes of conduct; many private enterprises and government bodies have ethical audits and ethical officers. Ethics (or moral philosophy) is closely linked with value and belief systems. Even within one community or society or culture, ethics is a complex issue. Across cultures and languages and national borders it becomes of course even more complex, as this audience will readily appreciate. Rather than speaking about universalist ethics, many prefer to concentrate on particularist ethics, such as professional codes of ethics in organizations or associations. We distinguish between metaethics, normative ethics and applied ethics, although these to some extent overlap. Normative ethics, in turn, distinguishes between

virtue-based, duty-based and consequentialist-based ethics, which again also in some degree overlap. What I present to you, is based on a Western understanding of ethics, which may not be fully consistent with older value and belief systems. In Western culture, one often thinks of the medical profession's Hippocratic Oath from around 275 CE as the oldest professional code of ethics. Yet in other cultures there are even older value or belief systems that can be defined as ethics. On a humoristic note, I have the privilege of being married for 42 years to an Egyptologist and archaeologist who keeps reminding me that civilization by no means originated in the West.

Professional codes of ethics are often within normative ethics and duty-oriented. The Call with its notion of our "ethical responsibility as communication scholars" clearly belongs here. Another example could be The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and its Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists. The first of nine principles states that "Respect for truth and for the right of the public to truth is the first duty of the journalist". (The International Federation of Journalists, 2018). But we all know that today truthful and accurate reporting for the benefit of the public is under very serious pressure in many parts of the world. Various forms of direct and indirect censorship or self-censorship are common, and many are now familiar with the concept of "fake news".

My interest in ethics began with my doctoral dissertation in the late 1990s on literary journalism in Soviet-Russia of the 1920s. I then delved into topics such as tsarist and Soviet censorship and self-censorship. Switching in 2000 to what has become Oslo Metropolitan University and working those first years in Library and Information Science, I published an edited anthology entitled *The Ethics of Librarianship* (Vaagan, 2002, 2012). The anthology came about not least due to the terror strikes in the USA on 9/11 2001 and the Patriot Act with increased surveillance of citizens, including the information that libraries possessed about visitors. The anthology contains contributions from library and information scholars and professionals in 17 countries, covering all continents. It discusses ethical challenges such as globalization, digital gaps, digital inclusiveness, proprietary versus public software, open access, privacy, authenticity, confidentiality, copyright, intellectual property rights, etc.

In recent years I have worked on global information and communication technology and the sources of ethical issues linked with individual rights. The notion of individual rights is admittedly very Western and contrasts with the notion of collective rights that we find in many countries. However, the model has also been expanded from information to include communication (two-way dialogue), especially through the Internet and social media. In this sense, the model is clearly influenced by the UN General Assembly's Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948, now in its 70<sup>th</sup> year, particularly Article 19 cited below. While this declaration has no legal status, it still provides strong ethical guidance. In 1948 The UN General Assembly stated that this declaration sets "a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations". Article 19 reads:

*"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" (United Nations, 2018)*

One answer, therefore, to the overall theme of this conference *Communication and Dialogue: Integrating Global Communities* would be to call for wider adherence and implementation of this declaration.

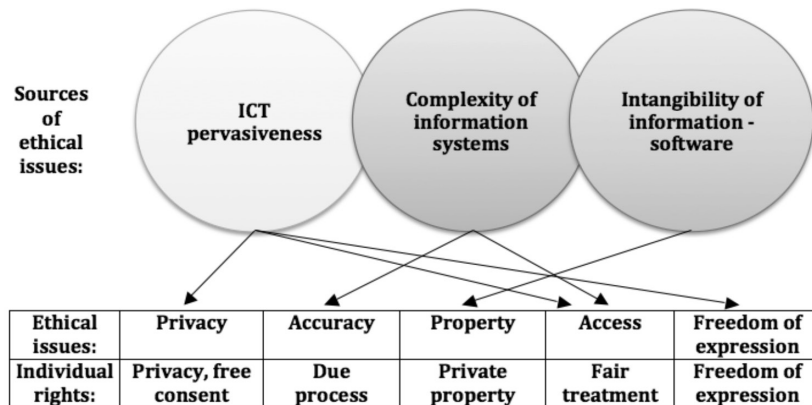


Figure 1. Sources, Issues and Individual Rights, Including Freedom of Expression (Vaagan, 2010)

Here is the model I have been working on. It identifies three main (but overlapping) sources of ethical issues for today's global ICT-dependent system for national and transnational flows of information and communication.

The first is **ICT pervasiveness**. ICT, which overlaps with the Internet and social media, increasingly pervades all spheres of modern life in many countries. According to Manuel Castells, increased Internet penetration is leading us towards a virtual global community. Although The International Telecommunication tells us that only 48% of the world's population has Internet, the figure is 81% in market economies versus 41% in emerging economies. The Internet of Things (IoT) illustrates this well, since it is integrating the physical world into ICT systems through ubiquitous sensors, robots and artificial intelligence. I have to add here that this is obviously a point where the model needs revision. These points also mean that the model may well need to be revised or expanded. This is because optimists believe this offers efficiency improvements, economic benefits and reduced human exertions. But pessimists predict a Big Brother or Doomsday scenario with hyper surveillance or even intelligent and vicious drones attacking mankind. Human survival may therefore be another dimension to be included. This has at least consequences for the ethical issues of privacy, access and freedom of speech. Maybe more (human survival). These in turn raise the question of individual rights such as privacy, free consent, access and fair treatment, as well as freedom of expression (maybe even human survival).

Regarding privacy, you may know that California lawmakers recently gave consumers unprecedented protections for their data and imposed tough restrictions on the tech industry, potentially establishing a privacy template for the rest of the nation. The law, which was rushed through the legislature in early July 2018 and signed by Gov. Jerry Brown, broadens the

definition of what constitutes personal information and gives California consumers the right to prohibit the sale of personal data to third parties and opt out of sharing it altogether. The bill applies to internet giants such as Facebook Inc. and to Alphabet Inc.'s Google, but also will affect businesses of any size that collect data on their customers (Vartabedian, 28.6.2018).

As for The European Union (EU), the recent EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) illustrates widespread concern with how global companies like Facebook, Google, Amazon, Apple have been handling privacy and free consent. This is a EU law on data protection and privacy for all individuals within the European Union and a few other countries like Norway in the European Economic Area (EEA). It also addresses the export of personal data outside the EU and EEA areas, including to the USA. The GDPR aims primarily to give control to citizens and residents over their personal data and to simplify the regulatory environment for international business by unifying the regulation within the EU (European Commission, 2018).

Secondly, **information systems** are complex (and costly) and often require special skill sets or competencies to master. Rapid technology changes add to this, likewise manipulative use as we have many examples of today (fake news, cyberattacks). This has consequences especially for the ethical issues of accuracy (which includes truthfulness) and access. These in turn are linked with the individual rights of due process and fair treatment. Regarding access I already quoted global Internet penetration figures. In terms of fair treatment, it is obviously a challenge that only about half the world's population has Internet access, even less in many emerging economies, so we cannot really yet talk about a virtual global community.

Thirdly, the **intangibility of information** from software often has consequences for property rights. The World Intellectual Property Organization specializes in issues like intellectual property rights (IPR), patents, copyright and trademarks. Illegal downloading of music and films is a major concern for authors, artists and media companies alike. Think about Apple's iTunes and iPhone technology, or proprietary software for electronic books, or ownership of user content in platforms like Facebook, Google. In Vaagan and Koehler (2005) property and the associated individual right of private property is discussed in some detail, including the World Intellectual Property Organization and consumer group reactions to the EU Directive for the Enforcement of Intellectual Property Rights. A good example is Pirate Bay, which is Swedish-based and the world's largest file sharing website. The legal and ethical controversy between proprietary versus public domain ownership surfaced 2009-2010 in the Pirate Bay court case in Sweden. Until today it has a long history of legal disputes in Sweden and elsewhere. In August 2016, the US government shut down KickassTorrents, which resulted in The Pirate Bay becoming once again the most visited BitTorrent website.

Today, the universality of human rights, including Article 19, is being debated in many countries. In 2009, a group of 56 Muslim countries led by Pakistan failed to get sufficient support in the UN General Assembly for a proposed "blasphemy" resolution, whereby defamation of religion was to be equated with racism.

Many Western scholars acknowledge that the universality principle has suffered a setback since the 1990s, starting with the fatwa against Salman Rushdie in 1999 through the Mohammed cartoon crisis from 2006. Many authoritarian regimes - and Moslem countries in particular - view the UNDHR and Article 19 as Western-imposed imperialism (Carlsson, 2016). Also, in many countries censorship and self-censorship are undermining the intention and spirit of



Article 19, including the provision to use “any media” such as social media.

In terms of legal provision, freedom of expression is enshrined in international legal conventions such as Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966, and in Article 10 in the European Declaration of Human Rights of 1950.

## 5. The International Science Council (ISC)

As communication scholars interested in ethics, we should also familiarize ourselves with The International Science Council (ISC). This is a non-governmental organization with a global membership composed of 120 national scientific bodies representing 141 member organizations, 39 member unions and associations and 29 affiliated members.

The mission of ISC (2018) is to:

- Act as the global voice for science. As part of that mission, the ISC aims to:
- Speak for the value of all science and evidence-informed decision-making;
- Stimulate and support international scientific research and scholarship on major issues of global concern;
- Articulate scientific knowledge on such issues in the public domain;
- Promote the continued and equal advancement of scientific rigor, creativity and relevance in all parts of the world;
- Defend the free and responsible practice of science

It would seem, therefore, that the ideas and activities of ISC correspond quite well with both the statutes of IAICS and the Call for Papers for this conference. By advocating the principle of the universality of science, ISC seeks to help build a truly international science community. Since science is a global enterprise, full participation in it requires free communication among all scientists, and free engagement in scientific discourse without repercussions, as well as equitable and non-discriminatory access to the tools of science. At the same time, these freedoms entail responsibilities on the part of all scientists in the conduct of their scientific work (International Science Council, 2018).

In conclusion, my presentation has attempted to show how IAICS and its many scholars can reach out through communication and dialogue to include global communities. We are doing it right now through organizing this conference in excellent cooperation with DePaul University. And in doing this, we are realizing the Vincentian mission.

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### **Author note**

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