



## **Communication Ethics (CMS 322e at UT Austin)**

Summer 2026, Session I

University of Erfurt, SPICE program

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### **Course Description**

How ought I to communicate with others? If my job places me in situations of persuading others to act or believe in certain ways, how far ought I go in doing this job? These are the general issues that this course explores. This course examines the ethical issues involved in communication situations, ranging from face-to-face situations to mediated forms like Twitter or film. It will train students how to evaluate ethical issues and decisions in a range of communication activities. We will explore major theories of what makes an action "ethical," and then engage a range of interesting case studies in free speech, blogging, social media, public relations, advertising, political communication, journalism, fake news (e.g., Jon Stewart), photo manipulation, documentary film, and organizational communication. We will also discuss the ethical implications of newer online communicative practices, including Anonymous's anti-bullying operations on Twitter, WikiLeaks, and the growing plague of revenge pornography. Our discussions of documentary ethics and organizational communication ethics will be grounded by viewing the documentary *Kumare* and a site visit to the Topf and Sons Place of Remembrance (Topf and Sons are known as the "oven-makers of the holocaust").

This course will begin with an examination of some major theorists in normative ethics. We will discuss the theories of what makes an action ethical by thinkers such as Aristotle, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Immanuel Kant, and John Rawls. Additionally, we will engage contemporary sources in feminist and pragmatist ethics. We will then take our knowledge of moral decision-making and begin exploring exciting and important contemporary topics in media and communication ethics. Through our examination of these ethical issues, we will continue to explore the uses and limits of the normative theories analyzed at the beginning of this course. Students are encouraged to determine for themselves which ethical system best captures what we think ought to be included in our concept of the person who lives and communicates with integrity.

### **Grading**

Course grades will be determined on the basis of:

Class participation	20%
Case Study Analysis	20%
Midterm Exam	25%
Research presentation	35%

Please note the due dates for all assignments. Late assignments or papers are unacceptable.

Final grades will be based on the following scale:

93-100% = A	87-89% = B+	77-79% = C+	67-69% = D+	59 & below = F
90-92% = A-	83-86% = B	73-76% = C	63-66% = D	
	80-82% = B-	70-72% = C-	60-62% = D-	

Consultations about grades are welcome in order to clarify course standards and procedures and to provide guidance that might improve future performance. Assigned grades will *not* be changed unless clear and significant procedural errors have occurred.

## **Requirements**

### ***Class Participation***

To earn an "A" for participation, students should (1) be prompt and attend all classes, (2) complete all assigned readings prior to class (3) consistently participate in class discussion and (4) display an understanding of the readings and demonstrate an ability to creatively apply course concepts. Some participation exercises may be done in class. Computers and cell phones can be a distraction to you and others in this class, so use them responsibly. Texting, email checking, Facebooking, cell phone use, web-surfing, instant messaging, etc. in class will not be tolerated during official class time—we're here to mindfully discuss the readings and topics, so be focused on this. It is fine to use a computer for note-taking or referencing the reading during class time, but you should only use it for these two purposes while in my class—this means you will not have chat windows open, Facebook open, email up, and so forth. Participation will be assessed using the following criteria:

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Description</b>
A	Student shows up to class on time, attends regularly, has completed the assigned readings, is engaged and participates
B	Student shows up to most classes on time and has attended most classes, student is prepared and participates occasionally
C	Student has missed a number of classes or often comes to class late, student does not participate often in class
D	Student has missed many classes and participates only rarely in class
F	Student has missed most classes and does not participate

There are many ways that you can participate, here are some:

- Bringing up relevant questions and comments in class
- Answering questions during class
- Emailing questions and comments

### ***Case Study Analysis Essay***

Students will write one short essay that uses a theory of ethics we've explored to evaluate a moral conflict. The essay should be no longer than four typed, double-spaced, pages (standard font, 1" margins). The paper assignment will be handed out in class, but it will involve the student applying a moral theory covered in class to a specific case study in communication ethics.

### ***Midterm Exam***

Halfway through the course, one test will be given. It will consist of multiple choice, true false, and short answer questions on the ethical theories and decision procedures we have been exploring. I will give some kind of study guide in advance of this test to aid studying. There is no final exam in this course.

## ***Research Presentation***

The course will end with students (in small groups of 2-3) giving research presentations on a topic in communication ethics of their choice. The presentation will consist of the students telling the course about the ethical issues in play and applying a moral theory to argue for a correct course of action. This assignment is very similar to the short essay assignment, except it involves you researching your own case or topic in communication ethics.

## **Notes to Syllabus:**

-Due dates: paper assignments must meet the announced due dates or be subject to a 20% penalty if turned in within two days (after two days, a zero must be recorded). Tests missed without medical, legal, or university documentation cannot be retaken.

-No extra credit will be offered.

-Plagiarism will not be tolerated. Using the text or ideas of someone else in your papers or presentations without clearly citing them is the stealing of those words or ideas, and significant cases will result in an "F" for the entire course (less significant cases will result in a "0%" on the assignment). I will also count the use of a papers, etc. produced for another class as plagiarism, so make sure you do original work that is solely your own creation for this course. As intelligent university students, I expect that none of you will resort to cheating on tests, papers, or presentations in this course. The use of AI programs or apps to compose your writing assignments will also count as plagiarism for the purposes of this course. **DO NOT USE AI TO COMPOSE OR EDIT YOUR ASSIGNMENTS.**

## **Course Calendar**

(Please note that assigned readings are subject to change with adequate email notice to students.)

### **SCHEDULE FOR COMMUNICATION ETHICS**

**Do listed readings BEFORE that class session ("OPTIONAL" denotes non-necessary readings)  
Bring the CASE STUDY READER to class; we will discuss the 25 cases in that over the  
various sessions**

#### **Week 1**

**(1) Friday, (4-8pm)** Moral Theories: Aristotle

(r1) Stroud, *What is Ethics?* (MED)

(r2) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I (selections)

**(2) Saturday, (10am-4pm; lunch break included)** Moral Theories: Utilitarianism & Kant

(r3) John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (selections)

(r4) Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (selections)

**(2) Sunday, (10am-4pm; lunch break included)** Moral Theories: Rawls & Care

(r5) Rita C. Manning, "Just Caring," from *Speaking from the Heart* (OPTIONAL)

(r6) Rita Manning & Scott Stroud, *A Practical Guide to Ethics*, pp. 69-81

#### **Week 2**

**(3) Friday, (4-8pm)** The Ethics of Lying and Communication

(r7) Immanuel Kant, "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy"

(r8) Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Wall"

(r9) "Cases and Commentaries: Wal-Mart Relations in the Blogosphere," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 22 (2&3), 2007, 215-228.

- (4) Saturday, (10am-4pm; lunch break included)** Journalism, WikiLeaks, and Fake Journalism  
(r10) James B. Murphy, Stephen J. A. Ward, & Aine Donovan, "Ethical Ideals in Journalism: Civic Uplift or Telling the Truth?" *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 21 (4), 2006, 322-337.  
(r11) Peter Ludlow, "Rethinking Conspiracy: The Political Philosophy of Julian Assange,"  
(r12) Sandra L. Borden & Chad Tew, "The Role of Journalist and the Performance of Journalism: Ethical Lessons from 'Fake' News (Seriously)," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 22 (4), 2007, 300-314.

- (5) Sunday, June 23 (10am-4pm; lunch break included) Exam**; Photo Manipulation and Modelling  
(r13) Sheila Reaves, Jacqueline Bush Hitchon, Sung-Yeon Park, & Gi Woong Yun, "If Looks Could Kill: Digital Manipulation of Fashion Models," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 19 (1), 2004, 56-71. (OPTIONAL)

### **Week 3**

- (7) Friday, (4pm-8pm)** Political Communication, Advertising, & Ethics  
(r14) John Stuart Mill, "On the Liberty of Thought and Discussion," from *On Liberty*  
(r15) Lynda Lee Kaid, "Ethics and Political Advertising," in *Political Communication Ethics: An Oxymoron?*

- (8) Saturday, (10am-4pm; lunch break included)** Blogging, Twitter, Revenge Porn, & Ethics  
(r16) Martin Kuhn, "Interactivity and Prioritizing the Human: A Code of Blogging Ethics," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 22 (1), 2007, 18-36.  
(r17) Scott R. Stroud & Danee Pye, "Kant on Unsocial Sociability and the Ethics of Social Blogging," *New Agendas in Communication: Ethics in Communication Professions*  
(r18) Scott R. Stroud, "The Dark Side of the Online Self: A Pragmatist Critique of the Growing Plague of Revenge Porn," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 29, 2014.

- (9) Sunday, (10am-4pm; lunch break included)** Advertising & Public Relations Ethics; **Short Paper Due**  
(r19) Hyo-Sook Kim, "Universalism versus Relativism in Public Relations," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 20 (4), 2005, 333-344. (OPTIONAL)  
(r20) Peter D. Hershock, "Media, Attention, and the Colonization of Consciousness: A Buddhist Perspective," in *Reason and Insight*

### **Week 4**

- (10) Friday, (4pm-8pm)** Organizational Ethics, the Ethics of Totalitarian Organizations in Germany  
(r21) Carole L. Jurkiewicz, *The Foundations of Organizational Evil* (selections)  
Lecture/discussion on PR Ethics; Walmart PR Blog case discussion  
\*Visit to Andreasstrasse Museum in Erfurt\*

- (11) Saturday, (10am-4pm; lunch break included)** Film/Documentary Ethics, the Ethics of Organizations in Nazi Germany  
(r22) Kate Nash, "Documentary-for-the-Other: Relationships, Ethics and (Observational) Documentary," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 26 (31), 2011, 224-239.  
\*Watch documentary film *Kumare* \*  
\*Visit to Topf & Söhne Museum in Erfurt\*

- (12) Sunday, (10am-4pm; lunch break included) Group Presentations Due**; Memorial Ethics in Germany, Final Thoughts on Integrity and Ethics  
\*Lecture/discussion on Memorial Ethics; visit to War Deserter's Monument in Erfurt\*