

*The Role of Ethical Principles in New Media: A Case of Pouring Old Wine into  
New Wine Skin?*

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**Abstract**

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that deals with the issues of right and wrong actions. Beyond the issue of right or wrong actions, ethics deals with the skills human persons may need to acquire in order to tackle different dilemmas in everyday life. One area knowledge of skills to handle dilemmas is very important in is the area of media ethics. Traditional media have come a long way and by implication have defined its ethical principles clearly to an extent. These principles define certain concepts such as who is a journalist? What are the principles that should guide journalists in the performance of their duties? Who are gate-keepers in journalism? How should gate-keepers make sure that the principles of media ethics are kept intact? The emergence of new media have revolutionized and redefined media practice in such a way that the concepts of truth, right, good, bad, and other principles are no longer clear to some extent, thus bringing a lot of questions on the principles of ethics that should be applied to new media. This paper will seek to establish whether the principles of media ethics as applied to traditional media can still be applied to new media in other words do we have a case of putting old wine in new wine skin or do we need a new set of ethical principles for new media?

Keywords: Ethics, Ethical principles, Media

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## **Introduction**

With the advancements in technology, the media today is no more what it used to be. The media is a social institution and as social institutions it is an agent of socialization. Traditional media practitioners were bound to abide by certain ethical principles just as social institutions. Media gatekeepers ensured that media practitioners worked according to rules of media practice.

For the purpose of this paper, ethics can be defined as the right ways, attitudes, of performing certain actions, which also includes the motives behind the main choices we take in doing our duties as human persons.

## **Statement of problem**

New media have affected the way we live as human persons. It has changed every aspect of human activity. What was unimaginable many years ago are now very possible. The freedom that is available through the new media platforms means that human persons are free to do whatever they liked. There is a huge difference between the new media and the traditional media; hence there is the need to determine the role of ethical principles should play in the new media and also whether the same ethical principles that were used for the traditional media can still be applicable to the new media in spite of the obvious differences. Studies have tried to establish the role of ethical principles in the new media but few have actually established whether the same ethical principles used for the traditional will still be applicable to the new media. This study, therefore, seeks to identify the role of ethical principles in the new media and also whether the same ethical principles used in traditional media will still be applicable to the new media.

## **Objectives of study**

1. Identify the role ethical principles should play in the new media.
2. Examine whether the ethical principles of the traditional media are still appropriate to the new media

## **Research questions**

1. What roles should ethical principles play in the new media?
2. To what extent are the ethical principles of the traditional media appropriate to the new media?

## **Significance of study**

The result of this study will be useful to both traditional and new media practitioners, professionals and non-professionals, scholars and media consumers.

## Literature review

**Ethical Principles:** Ethical principles are the viewpoints from which guidance can be obtained along the pathway to a decision. Ethical principles are standards such as values, morals and ideals that promote values such as trust, good behaviour, fairness, and kindness when they are duly followed. Ethical principles act as guides, as they help the human person to make the right choices. Every profession has ethical principles that act as guiding precepts for practitioners, to guide right conduct. Ethical principles that are appropriate to media practice are truth, objectivity, balance, fairness, privacy, non-disclosure and accuracy. The institutional structure of the old or traditional media is built upon these ethical principles. The traditional media works comfortably with these principles.

The social functions of the media as stipulated by Lasswell (1948), Schramm (1960), Wright (1986) and McQuail (2000) need the principles of media ethics to be able to function properly. Without these principles, the social responsibility theory of the media which was well articulated and applied by scholars to enhance and develop the dignity of the human person cannot benefit the human person and his society at large. According to Habermas (1989), the media is the public sphere where individuals are privileged to express their views. The exchange of views is an indication that the human being is a person that is capable of making good and functional use of his thinking faculty to be able to exchange ideas, views and opinions with the fellow human person.

**New media defined:** The term 'new media' simply means a newer and better medium of reaching out to people. Advancement in technology has brought about the growth of new media and, because technologies keep improving by the day, it becomes difficult to adequately define new media. The arrival of Information Technology (IT) has brought about a more stable definition of what is termed 'new media' today. Thus, new media may be defined as modern media that create experience through the use of all of the existing and new different media, emerging technologies, and expertise. They most commonly refer to contents that are available on-demand through the internet, accessible on any digital device, usually containing interactive user feedback and creative participation. Common examples of new media include websites such as online newspapers, blogs, or wikis, video games, and social media. The question then comes to mind: what is really 'new' about 'new media'?

**The differences between old and new media:** It is important to clearly state what is new about new media as this will help to create the boundary between new and old media. As Lister et al (2009) rightly notes, "'old' media technologies were themselves once new and held enormous significance for their contemporaries for that very reason." (p. 4) the implication is that, what is termed as new media at this present time is termed, 'new media' because it is 'new' to this modern age. New media have the distinguishing quality of being "digital, interactive, hypertextual, virtual, networked, and simulated" (Lister et al. 2009, p. 13). Below are some of the differences between old and new media:

- **Digital/Analogue:** Most technologies that are described as "new media" are digital, while the old media are analogue. "The major media of the nineteenth and early twentieth century (prints, photographs, films and newspapers) were the products not only of analogue processes but also of technologies of mass

production. For this reason, these traditional mass media took the form of industrially mass-produced physical artefacts which circulated the world as copies and commodities" (Lister et al. 2009, p. 17).

- Interactivity: The new media creates an interactive platform that engages users and audiences actively, while the old media is rather passive. According to Lister et al (2009), "at the ideological level, interactivity has been one of the key 'value added' characteristics of new media. Where 'old' media offered passive consumption new media offer interactivity." (p. 21).
- Hypertextuality: Another difference between the old and the new media is in their level of hypertextuality. Hypertextuality in the sense in which the machine-readable text is organised, not sequential, and connects related information together. It is in this level of hypertextuality that the new media differs from the old media. "Hypertextuality has ideological overtones and is another key term that has been used to mark off the novelty of new media from analogue media" (Lister et al., 2009, p. 25).
- Networked: New media can be regarded as being the networked means of communication, while the old media is not. Lister et al (2009) says, "New media can be seen as networked rather than mass for the way in which consumers can now more easily extend their participation in media from active interpretation to actual production" (p. 35).
- Virtual and simulated: The other differences between the old and the new media are in their perception of the reality of the contents or images they produce. It should be noted that, "simulations are real; they exist, and are experienced within the real world which they augment" (Lister et al., 2009, p. 44). In the new media, the experience of identity and self are mediated in what could be referred as 'a virtual space'.

In trying to answer the question on what is new about new media, Silverstone (1999) talks about new media in this light, "the new is new. The technologies that have emerged in recent years, principally but not exclusively digital technologies, are new. They do new things. They give us new powers. They create new consequence for us as human beings. They bend minds. They transform institutions. They liberate. They oppress" (p. 10).

However, in spite of the seeming benefits of the new media, the challenges of the new media are indeed enormous. The gatekeeping function of the media which is important in the traditional media seems to have crumbled with the new media. There are no geographical barriers; anybody can produce or consume any type of media anytime, anywhere, irrespective of the age, religion, social or educational status. Nothing is hidden under the sun. The advent of new media has revolutionised communication, business, education, family and, of course, any type of human endeavour. One thing is clear: this revolution can be positive or negative. A lot of scholars argue that the world will never be the same again because of new media. With the enormous changes come ethical challenges which are different from the ethical challenges of the traditional media.

New media has also revolutionised evangelisation as it is easy to reach several numbers of people through the new media tools. Terrorism and religious fundamentalism feed on the speed, anonymity, interaction (human social interactions) that the new media avails its users. "Blogs allow people to speak out about issues they care about, massive multiplayer online games invite players to modify them as they

play, and social networking sites permit participants to forge new connections with people beyond their real-world cliques, schools, communities, and even countries. In the most idealistic terms, the new digital media holds great potential for facilitating civil society, civic engagement, and democratic participation" (Carrie et al., 2009, p.7). People can interact with anybody, anywhere on diverse issues in the world. There is a school of thought that is of the view that new media has done more harm than good; others believe that new media has transformed the world in a positive way with new ways of doing things.

In whatever way one looks at it, it is obvious that even if new media's influence is doing good and positive, there is still need to incorporate ethical principles in the production and consumption of new media. Without the introduction of ethical principles into new media, they will become the source of several menaces in the society. According to Carrie et al. (2009), "five core issues are salient in the new media – identity, privacy, ownership and authorship, credibility, and participation. These issues have long been considered important offline as well. Yet in digital spaces, these issues may carry new or at least distinct ethical stakes. It thus seems critical to ask whether the new digital media is giving rise to new mental models—new 'ethical minds'—with respect to identity, privacy, ownership and authorship, credibility, and participation and whether the new digital media requires a reconceptualization of these issues and the ethical potentials they carry" (p. 5). The question is: what kind and to what extent can traditional media ethics be applied to new media?

### **Can the same ethical principles used for traditional media be applied to new media?**

To answer this question, it is pertinent to discuss the principle, object and subject of the media. The human person is and ought to be the principle, object and subject of any social institution, including the media. In other words, one can safely say that the human person should and ought to be the principle, subject and object of the both traditional and new media. If this is so, what role should ethical principles play in new media? In a nutshell, the ethical principles should help the human person to rediscover, appreciate, develop and remember who he is: a creature that is above all creations. A creature born with dignity that is rational and that can make choices, a moral agent who should be responsible for his actions. This human agency can and should be put into consideration when producing and consuming new media contents. Human agency distinguishes the human person from other creatures because they can reason and can make choices.

Having said this, it is obvious that the principles and values of the traditional media are constant for the human person. The human person is still a social being who needs other beings for survival. Human needs are changing and humans are always finding the means to make their environment conducive for their yearnings. The basic needs of humans are universal, considering the theory of Abraham Maslow (Maslow, 1954). The ethical principles still play an immense role in helping to remind and restore the dignity of human person.

There are many ethical principles. This paper will only attempt to deal with the principles that will help to make new media a tool for the enhancement and

development of the human person who is in the world to achieve and fulfil his potentials. Several ethical principles will be reviewed in order to discuss how relevant they may be in helping the new media consumers and producers to discover their dignity and place in the affairs of the universe. Why do we say that these ethical principles should still serve humanity in this new media dispensation? We are going to use two normative ethical theories to make our argument: virtue ethics and deontology i.e. duty ethics.

### **Theoretical framework**

This work is hinged on the normative theories of Aristotle (Virtue ethics) Immanuel Kant (Deontology). Aristotle's virtue ethics is based on the argument that virtue is a habit that can be learnt and this learning is made possible through practice (Geirsson & Holmgren, 2000). It focuses on the inherent trait that individuals need to develop in themselves (Geirsson & Holmgren, 2000) and it describes the qualities of a virtuous person and implies that the human person can build up moral character over time and this is made possible through consistent practice and action. "Kant sees morality as a species of practical rationality, and offers a test of the latter" (McNaughton & Rawling, 2006, p. 436). The purpose of making use of Aristotle's virtue ethics theory and Kant's deontology ethics theory is to find a common ground between two extremes and apply these theories to a middle ground in the new media.

The main points of these theories are to elevate the dignity of human person. According to Aristotle, the main aim of ethics is for happiness. Kant is of the opinion that the human person should be respected because the human person is not a thing. They should not be treated as a means to an end. These two theories buttress the point that truths are obstinate, they refuse to quit, therefore ethical principles should not change to suit humans, rather humans should uphold their dignity by making use of these principles in their day to day life, no matter the innovation because the metaphysical development of humanity is real. The moment human persons allow the tools that have been made available by the new media to control them; they have ceased to become human persons. This is what the virtue ethics and the deontology ethics will help to address in building a framework for the role of ethical principles in the new media.

### **Research Methodology**

This is a descriptive research design study. The qualitative research method was used to analyse several new media platforms with a view to using them to answer the research questions.

### **Presentation, analysis and discussion**

A critical look was taken at some of the policies of some new media platforms in order to provide the framework for the analysis

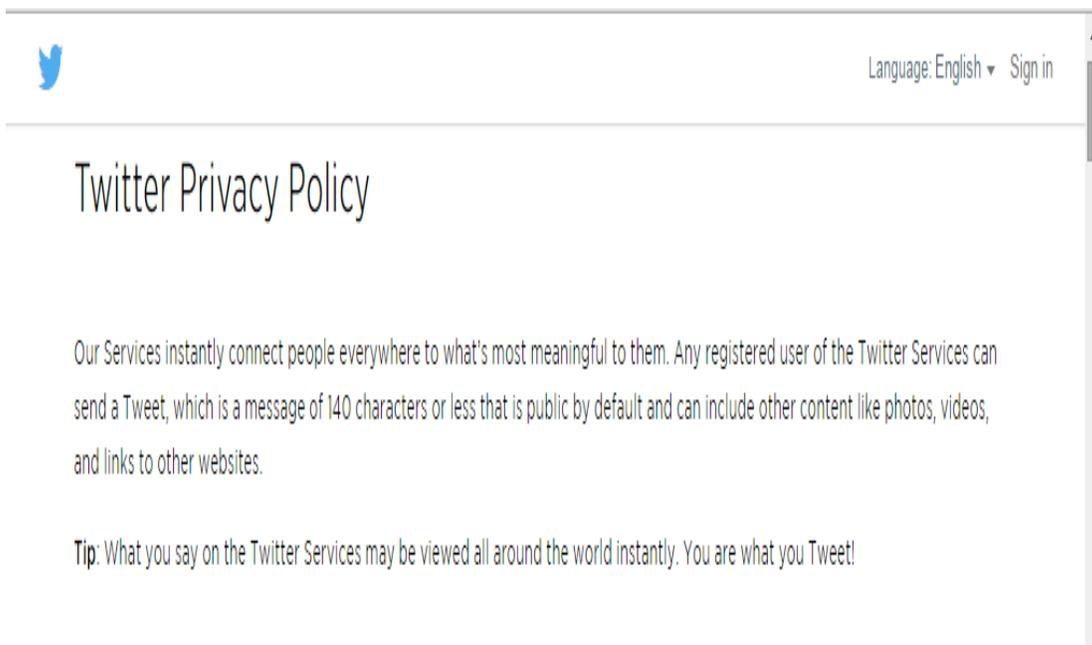
## Facebook



The screenshot shows the Facebook login interface. At the top, there is a dark blue header with the Facebook logo on the left and login fields on the right. The login fields include 'Email or Phone' and 'Password' with corresponding input boxes, a 'Log In' button, and a 'Keep me logged in' checkbox. Below the header, a navigation menu on the left lists 'Terms' and 'More Resources' with sub-links like 'View the complete Data Policy', 'Interactive Tools', 'Minors and Safety', 'Facebook Privacy Page', 'Facebook Safety Page', and 'Facebook Site Governance Page'. The main content area features a large blue heading 'What kinds of information do we collect?' followed by a paragraph: 'Depending on which Services you use, we collect different kinds of information from or about you.' Below this is a section titled 'Things you do and information you provide.' with a blue vertical bar on the left, containing text about content collection: 'We collect the content and other information you provide when you use our Services, including when you sign up for an account, create or share, and message or communicate with others. This can include information in or about the content you provide, such as the location of a photo or the date a file was created. We also collect information about how you use our Services, such as the types of content you view or engage with or the frequency and duration of your activities.'

**Source:** <https://www.facebook.com/privacy/explanation>

## Twitter



The screenshot shows the Twitter Privacy Policy page. At the top, there is a white header with the Twitter logo on the left and 'Language: English' and 'Sign in' on the right. Below the header, the main heading is 'Twitter Privacy Policy'. The text below reads: 'Our Services instantly connect people everywhere to what's most meaningful to them. Any registered user of the Twitter Services can send a Tweet, which is a message of 140 characters or less that is public by default and can include other content like photos, videos, and links to other websites.' Below this is a 'Tip' section: 'Tip: What you say on the Twitter Services may be viewed all around the world instantly. You are what you Tweet!'

**Source:** <https://twitter.com/privacy?lang=en>

## Blogger



### Blogger Content Policy

Language:

Blogger is a free service for communication, self-expression and freedom of speech. We believe Blogger increases the availability of information, encourages healthy debate, and makes possible new connections between people. It is our belief that censoring this content is contrary to a service that bases itself on freedom of expression.

However, in order to uphold these values, we need to curb abuses that threaten our ability to provide this service and the freedom of expression it encourages. As a result, there are some boundaries on the type of content that can be hosted with Blogger. The boundaries we've defined are those that both comply with legal requirements and that serve to enhance the service as a whole.

If you encounter a blog that you believe violates our policies, please report it to us using the 'Report Abuse' link located at the top of each blog under the 'More' dropdown. If the blog owner has hidden this link, you can still report abuse in the Blogger Help Center.

### Content Boundaries

Our content policies play an important role in maintaining a positive experience for you, the users. Please respect these guidelines. From time to time, we may change our content policies so please check back here. Also, please note that when applying the policies below, we may make exceptions based on artistic, educational, documentary, or scientific considerations or where there are other substantial benefits to the public from not taking action on the content.

**Adult Content:** We do allow adult content on Blogger, including images or videos that contain nudity or sexual activity. If your blog contains adult content, please mark it as 'adult' in your Blogger settings. We may also mark blogs with adult content where the owners have not. All blogs marked as 'adult' will be placed behind an 'adult content' warning interstitial. If your blog has a warning interstitial, please do not attempt to circumvent or disable the interstitial - it is for everyone's protection.

There are some exceptions to our adult content policy:

- Do not use Blogger as a way to make money on adult content. For example, don't create blogs that contain ads for or links to commercial porn sites.
- We do not allow illegal sexual content, including image, video or textual content that depicts or encourages rape, incest, bestiality, or necrophilia.
- Do not post or distribute private nude or sexually explicit images or videos without the subject's consent. If someone has posted a private nude or sexually explicit image or video of you, please report it to us [here](#).

**Source:** <https://www.blogger.com/content.g?hl=en>

## YouTube

Safety Creators Advertise Developers Help

### About YouTube

Launched in May 2005, YouTube allows billions of people to discover, watch and share originally-created videos. YouTube provides a forum for people to connect, inform, and inspire others across the globe and acts as a distribution platform for original content creators and advertisers large and small.

YouTube is a Google company.

**Source:** <https://www.youtube.com/yt/about/>

No.	Category	New Media Platform	Description	Issues and impacts
1	Social Networking	Facebook	Facebook gives its users the privilege to share information about themselves, their activities and interests with friends, and other individuals they allow having access to the information.	<p>1. Privacy issues: Personally identifiable information is sustained on Facebook and is easily accessible</p> <p>2. Copyright issues: Copyrighted materials such as photos, videos can be uploaded by a Facebook user on his/her timeline</p> <p>3. Indecent contents: Contents that are not decent for general public are usually allowed on Facebook. Pornographic contents and other images that are not decent for public consumption are allowed on Facebook</p>
2	Microblogging	Twitter	Twitter is a short-message mobile broadcast service that gives its users the opportunity to keep their 'followers' abreast of recent happenings through 'tweets.' Tweets are typically 140 characters and the 'followers' of an individual on twitter are updated on the individual's activities, events, thoughts, and so on.	<p>1. Privacy issues: All your tweets are made public the moment you enter them. Your followers and other people on Twitter have access to your tweets.</p> <p>2. Unintentional or intentional disclosure of sensitive or improper information.</p> <p>3. Content limit of 140 characters has the capability of being misinterpreted by users as they will likely not have a grasp of the full story or the intended story.</p>
3	Blogs	Blogger.com	Basically an online platform that allows any individual or group of individuals to publish online. These individuals are called bloggers and they typically share	<p>1. Unintentional or intentional disclosure of sensitive or improper information</p> <p>2. Quality control issues: The materials that are posted by bloggers are not usually checked whether they meet the</p>

			<p>personal insights and a running log of events with other online audience. Bloggers usually provide news or commentaries on particular subjects and they give their teeming audience the opportunity to drop their comments in an interactive format.</p>	<p>expected quality or standard that is expected of contents that is allowed to go public.  3. Copyright issues arise when materials are plagiarized (used without acknowledging the source(s)).</p>
<b>4</b>	<b>Video</b>	<b>YouTube</b>	<p>You tube gives individuals the privilege to share, distribute and play video contents and other audio visual materials on the internet</p>	<p>1. Privacy issues:  YouTube keeps the record of personally identifiable information  2. Copyright issues:  Copyrighted materials can be uploaded and shared on one's YouTube channel  3. Indecent contents:  Contents that are not decent for general public are usually allowed on YouTube.  Pornographic contents and other contents that are not decent for public consumption are allowed on YouTube</p>

**Table 1: Analysis of some new media platforms**

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Facebook</b>	<b>Twitter</b>	<b>Blogger.com</b>	<b>You tube</b>
<b>1. What roles should ethical principles play in the new media?</b>	The ethical principles should help tackle the privacy and copyright issues associated with Facebook. It will also help to ensure that the contents have an appreciable degree of decency.	The ethical principles should help to tackle the privacy and disclosure issues associated with Twitter.	The ethical principles should help tackle the disclosure, decency and Quality-control issue associated with Blogs.	The ethical principles should help tackle the privacy and copyright issues associated with YouTube. It should also help ensure that the contents have an appreciable degree of decency.
<b>2. To what extent are the ethical principles of the old media appropriate to the new media?</b>	They are highly appropriate, with the human person at the centre of it all.	They are highly appropriate, with the human person at the centre of it all.	They are highly appropriate, with the human person at the centre of it all.	They are highly appropriate, with the human person at the centre of it all.

**Table 2 Responses to the research questions**

### **Summary, conclusion and recommendation**

The empirical studies reviewed gave divergent views of the role of ethical principles in new media. The two normative theories of ethics that were used to analyze the issues clearly showed that the human person has the ability to know what is right or wrong (virtue ethics) and owes the society a duty to do the things that are beneficial to the society (duty ethics). It has been discovered that the human person should and ought to be the principle, subject and object of both the traditional and new media. It should be noted that the reason that ethical principles seem to have been successful with the traditional media is in the fact that the human person decided to be ethical as much as possible. If that was the case with the traditional media, it can also be the case with the new media. It is the technology that has changed; humans are still in control of these new media technologies.

From the policies of the new media platforms above, it is clear that the new media platforms have placed the individuals at the centre of it all, in terms of control. Thus,

the human person has been given the choice to do what is right or what is wrong. However, the human persons that make use of the new media should be made to realize that the choice they make affects them and other human persons and, for this reason, they should conduct themselves ethically as much as possible.

The application of ethical principles is very important because, without them, there will be no reason to ask whether new media uses conduct themselves ethically or not. They should be applied now than ever before, especially in this present time that the world is presently bedeviled by several problems that have been propagated by the 'unchecked' freedom available on the new media platforms. The application of ethical principles would definitely help reduce these problems. The human persons should be made to realize that rather than allow the new media technologies control them, they should control the new media. In doing this, they show that they control whatever happens in their world (for the good of all).

However, the problem created by the new media is not just a problem of the new media alone, but also the human person. Therefore, the problem of humans is not that of new media, but that of humans themselves, who need to rediscover themselves and their reasons of existence. Humans are rational beings that should be guided by knowledge, logic and the metaphysical aspects of their existence. Thus, the new media should, through its surveillance, correlation, transmission of cultural heritage (Lasswell. 1948), entertainment (Wright, 1960) and its mobilization (McQuail, 2000) functions, remind humans of who they are and also help to advance the development of the human person and the society through the social institutions.

In the case of new media (new wine), the old wine skin (ethical principles ) should be ***reinvented and reintroduced*** in such a way that they should steer the new media into a tool of human development which should be used ***to restore the dignity of the human person.***

The application of the ethical principles should help to address the many issues of new media such as: identity/anonymity, privacy, images, speed, unauthenticated information/credibility, taste and decency, plagiarism and so on.

More attention should be paid to the gatekeeping theory as it applies to the new media. In this case, the 'creators' or 'administrators' of new media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the likes are the gatekeepers and they should be held accountable for the unethical practices that take place on their platforms. This would make them to take the matter of ethics more seriously.

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