

The Moral Media



**How
Journalists
Reason About Ethics**

LEE WILKINS
RENITA COLEMAN

THE MORAL MEDIA

How Journalists Reason
About Ethics

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How Journalists Reason About Ethics

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To David and John

...and to all the professionals who so generously took time out of their busy day to cooperate with a couple of “ivory tower” academics on a rather long survey

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Preface

This book is designed to provide readers with some preliminary answers to questions about ethical thinking in a professional environment. For those who are or aspire to be journalists, it attempts to describe how some of your professional colleagues make ethical decisions—what is important to them and what influences their thinking. For scholars in journalism and mass communication, it provides some rigorous and empirically grounded answers to questions such as: Do journalists, although they may lack the vocabulary of moral philosophy reason through moral questions in ways that classical philosophers would recognize? For psychologists, particularly those interested in human development and behavior, it asks if visual information—the kind contained in photographs— aids thinking. And for philosophers who read this book, we attempt to describe how people build their own philosophical worlds, and how those mental constructions actually influence professional practice. What we seek to create is a theoretical loom that weaves the threads of professional life into a recognizable pattern. That’s what we hope professionals will find in this book—real lives and real choices they recognize.

We also leave some important questions incompletely explored. This volume, based on necessity in one particular understanding of moral development, cannot fully explore all the alternate explanations to moral development now current in the psychological literature. However, alternative explanations are offered, particularly when they provide additional explanatory power and depth. Furthermore, this book explores only a few of the ethical issues that journalists face. Finally if people come to this book seeking to learn why people say one thing and do another—particularly when ethics is involved—this volume, although it addresses the question in some ways, will be incomplete. Instead, we hope this work will serve as a beginning on which other scholars, and indeed professionals who are concerned with quality of ethical decision making in the media, can build. We intend this book as a first step—not the last. We invite others to follow.

So, what did we do? First, we asked working professionals to take an ethics test. This paper-and-pencil test, what psychologists call an *instrument*, was devised almost 30 years ago by psychologist James Rest, who was working with nursing students at the University of Minnesota. Rest took the best known of the moral development theories at the time, the work of Harvard psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, and turned Kohlberg’s in-depth interview approach into a “test” that could be completed in less than 1 hour. That test is now known as the *Defining Issues Test* (DIT). It has been given to literally thousands of professionals. This book represents the first publication of journalists’ and advertising practitioners’ response to the DIT; it compares thinking about ethics by these two groups with the thinking of other professionals.

Part I of the book, therefore, includes chapters that explain the DIT and place it within the larger history of three fields: psychology philosophy and mass communication. Part I also includes both a statistical (quantitative) and narrative (qualitative) analysis of

journalists' responses to the DIT. Part I represents the baseline scholarship of this volume.

Part II attempts to add to scholarship and theory building in these three disciplines, first through making changes in the DIT that added an element of visual information processing to the test. The impact of visual information on ethical thinking is further tested when race is made a prominent component of that visual information. In addition to pushing the theoretical boundaries of moral development, we attempted, with the help of two colleagues, to think deeply about two issues in applied ethics: deception and persuasion. Members of Investigative Reporters and Editors, arguably the journalism profession's most prestigious professional organization and a group whose ethical decision making has been examined using the case study approach, were surveyed and then interviewed in depth about deception as professionals understand it. The results of that work present both some fine-grained thinking about this issue and a cogent analysis of the external influences that may—and we do believe do—impinge on ethical thinking. Part II concludes with a chapter that reports how advertising professionals respond to the DIT and, in particular, the impact that “clientcentered” thinking has on those decisions.

The final section of the book, Part III, explores the larger meaning of this effort and links the results to both theory and practice in philosophy, psychology and mass communication. We acknowledge that there may be alternate interpretations to our work. However, the concluding portion of the book represents our attempt to make the best case for the melding of theory, practice, and aspiration that this research represents.

In our view, this is a book about connections—among various intellectual disciplines, between the academy and the profession of journalism, and among those of us who believe that what journalists do is essential and that we need to find ways to do it better. We hope the work speaks to multiple audiences, that it makes everyone think, and that it provides a sound base on which to build.

—*Lee Wilkins*
—*Renita Coleman*

Part I

UNDERSTANDING JOURNALISTS' RESPONSES TO MORAL QUESTIONS

