MAKING A MONKEY LOOK GOOD: THE CASE FOR CONSUMER ETHICS OF ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA

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INTRODUCTION

There is a deep ethical divide in public discourse between two spheres of media influence that are not necessarily as distinct as they have often been characterized: Journalism and “Hollywood.” Historically, there has been a divide, even if socially constructed, between the corresponding concepts—also social constructs in their own right—of information and entertainment. A hallmark of our current 21st century media discourse is the blurring of that line, touted by multiple and seemingly innumerable social critics, scholars, and pundits. Yet wholly absent from that abundance of social criticism of this ongoing mélange of “information” and “entertainment” is a sharp point of distinction:

Hooray for Hollywood
That phoney, super coney Hollywood
They come from Chillicothes and Padukahs
With their bazookas to get their names up in lights
All armed with photos from local rotos
With their hair in ribbons and legs in tights

Hooray for Hollywood
You may be homely in your neighborhood
But if you think that you can an actor
See Mr. Factor, he’d make a monkey look good
With a half an hour, you’ll look like Tyrone Power
Hooray for Hollywood

—“Hooray for Hollywood,” as performed by Doris Day
The media discourse of “entertainment” is ethically lacking. Various ethical codes associated with public information have long been in place, particularly in the formalized rules of the North American journalism industry established more than a century ago. Groups formed to enforce ethical codes in the discourse of information are fairly commonplace, notably the Society of Professional Journalists. However, despite a handful of ethical attempts within particular subsectors, no corresponding system of formal ethical codes and organizations for the entertainment industry has ever been instituted, and in fact is highly unlikely to be brought about. Yet the critical discourse continues, regardless of the bifurcated issue of ethics clearly recognized and valued in terms of information while wholly overlooked and minimized in entertainment. This has profound implications for consumers of entertainment.

In this essay, I argue that media—which circulate information and entertainment alike, thereby playing key roles in defining social reality—certainly have an ethical obligation to consider the possible implications of that social definition of reality. However, since the media industries are complex and loath to consider across-the-board codes of content, the ethical burden shifts to media consumers, who carry an ethical obligation to choose media messages that are individually and socially beneficial. In making this argument, I will begin by showing that the discourse of ethics certainly applies to the sphere of media entertainment, every bit as much as in the context of journalism, by examining the historical development of both, including the emergence of a system of ethics in U.S. journalism. I will then show that the continuing melding of “information” and “entertainment,” as well as the socializing effect of mass media in general, indicates the clear need for a discussion of individual and social ethics. I will conclude by showing how ethics can be applied to modern entertainment settings—in this case, via case studies that demonstrate the relevance of entertainment ethics—and exploring the corresponding meanings for teaching ethics in popular-culture courses.

Though the idea of entertainment ethics is somewhat novel, a number of scholars have addressed the issue in various settings, particularly since the 1990s amid public and governmental debates over violence, children’s programming, and sexuality in broadcast/cable/Web telecommunications settings. For instance, reflecting the substance of the 1990s debate that ultimately led to the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and the V-chip, Lind and Rarick (1992) documented lack of “family
values” and violence and adult themes as major audience-related ethical concerns. They also showed that television viewers were more likely to tolerate ethical breaches in entertainment than news and information, endorsing a ratings-type advisory system as sufficient to resolve ethical concerns. John McManus (1992), meanwhile, identified an inherent ethical conflict between serving the public interest and trying to compete for viewers in the media market under standard media-production practice. McManus emphasized advertising more than entertainment per se, but demonstrated a core entertainment-relevant ethical problematic: Seeking attention and entertaining media consumers was valued much more highly than informing them. However, an approach that seeks to convey information using entertainment strategies could also be ethically problematic, as Brown and Singhal (1993) demonstrate, since such efforts can easily be misinterpreted or counterproductive and ultimately yield little if any difference in terms of observed behavior or other social outcomes.

More modern ethical treatises on entertainment have taken a more comprehensive approach, targeting specific areas or topics within the various industries rather than attempting to address the media as a whole. For instance, Cooke-Jackson and Hansen (2008) target media stereotypes of Appalachians and recommend a decision-making process for media to avoid stereotyping and creating ethical portrayals of fictional characters and real people alike. Babcock (2005) considers the election of movie-action hero celebrity Arnold Schwarzenegger as the governor of California as a case study of not only the confounding of information and entertainment, but of the difficulty of obtaining a consensus on information and meaning in the postmodern world. As Schwarzenegger-as-macho-warrior morphs into Schwarzenegger-as-head-of-embattled-California, thanks mainly to name recognition from his films, the ethics of information become confounded as the entertainment-based reputation of celebrity takes precedence. As celebrity becomes increasingly important, and more so than the value of information in a post-modern society, credibility and truth themselves are called into question.

Contemporary perspectives on ethics and entertainment likewise tend to break down the ethics of modern media and entertainment into various different areas. A compilation by Lee Wilkins (2008), for instance, takes something of a macro-social perspective, considering ethics and ethical issues within various spheres of media, such as public relations, pornography, journalism, and corporate media; it also takes on
a philosophical flavor with treatises on diversity, truth and objectivity, freedom of expression, and feminism. Yet the text as a whole does not develop any sort of at-length comprehensive framework for dealing with entertainment writ large. Howard Good’s anthology (2010), however, comes closer, with sections on ethical implications for entertainment relevant to celebrity news and children’s media, as well as (in a more philosophical tack), factuality/credibility, authorship/production, and human dignity; the latter section reprints Cooke-Jackson and Hansen’s article (2008) on stereotypes, for instance.

However, Good, like Wilkins, likewise fails to develop a comprehensive framework for the ethics of entertainment. Ginny Whitehouse (2010), also a contributor to Wilkins’ volume, states that creating such a framework is not Good’s purpose; his compilation is “not designed to be an end-all overview of the entertainment ethics field. It offers limited discussion of international and cross-cultural issues surrounding entertainment ethics; most notably absent are discussions of ethnic invisibility and cultural imperialism” (Ibid.) Yet it seems curious that such anthologies of ethical dilemmas within entertainment could or would be compiled without a comprehensive framework addressing the ethics of entertainment as a whole. Explaining just what’s right and wrong with making the monkey look good, as it were, would certainly be time-consuming, necessitate the incorporation of multiple perspectives, and a number of other challenges. However, the real and prospective difficulties of developing a comprehensive framework of the ethics of entertainment hardly obviate the need for it. This essay encouraging one among media consumers, I hope, is a step in the right direction.

Before beginning, however, a disclaimer and a personal note. First, this essay is hardly a campaign for advocacy against the entertainment industries. It is highly unlikely—for reasons to be explored shortly—that the North American entertainment media (often rather simplistically referred to as “Hollywood”) or its global counterparts would ever actually adopt a code of ethics in the current media context. I simply wish to demonstrate that the logical rationale and social need exists nonetheless for a comprehensive discussion of ethics and entertainment. Moreover, given that it may be more efficient to encourage media consumers than to attempt to influence the various media industries, I also argue that this direction is likely to be more fruitful. In a social sphere with the pop-cultural reputation for making monkeys look good, as in another that long ago realized that pictures and text could be used to spark figurative and literal wars alike, it is important to ensure that
media consumers grasp the difference between fact and fiction and the associated ethical implications.

Second, on a personal note, the ideas in this paper were developed in the context of discussion with fellow faculty members in our 2009-10 Lincoln Polytechnic Ethics fellowship program. I am indebted to my colleagues for a great deal of thought-provoking discussion that ranged from topics as diverse as bioethics and sustainability to nutrition and human communication. I give all due credit for this paper to the discussions that took place in that fellowship seminar. I also thank the students in my Fall 2009 and Spring 2010 courses on the mass-media definition of “reality” in television (MCO 240, Contemporary Problems in Popular Culture), which I used as something of a living laboratory to apply many of these ideas and ethical approaches. There, we soon realized that it was fruitless to recommend the production of ethical codes within the sphere of popular entertainment—which formal rules and regulations, as noted in the following section, tend to be concessions to legal authorities and consumer watchdog groups more than any sort of normative “reform” or change in professional procedure. Instead, we more often approached the ethical implications of media depicting one world that differs starkly from the values and ideals held by many in the viewing audience. These range from minor disruptions to major contradictions. We also considered the ethics of the entertainment viewer, given that ethical discrepancy between what is shown and what the viewer may believe or value. For the sake of class focus, we largely restricted ourselves to the sphere of television entertainment, though examples could have been taken from virtually any form of media. My colleagues and students alike yielded many valuable insights, without which this paper would be largely meaningless.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR INFORMATIONAL ETHICS

 Journalism, or the American news industry, representing the “information” side of the media spectrum, developed a code of ethical behavior along with its professionalization in the 19th century. This, of course, was far from a new development. The movement towards journalism ethics had its roots in the English Reformation of the 1640s, as well as in the overall Renaissance tradition before then. The press tradition of this time was rather authoritarian, with the state (and to a lesser extent than in Medieval times, the church) largely striving to control the distribution of information. John Milton and a number of
others advocated a fully libertarian approach to the public discourse, arguing that in a climate that allowed for all ideas to be freely discussed, information that deserved to be accepted as true and correct would rise on its own merits, and that which didn’t deserve to be trusted would fall out of consideration. Authoritarianism’s primary concern was preserving its own power structure and not allowing the press to undermine it; libertarianism’s primary concern was individual and collective freedom to speak freely without repercussions from the power structure. Hence, the history of the press would be characterized by an ongoing tension between authoritarian and libertarian approaches, ultimately resulting in the American context a sort of compromise—social responsibility, which allowed for the critique of those in power in libertarian style while agreeing to uphold the power structure to satisfy authoritarian concerns (Ward 2005).

American journalism, which always enjoyed a fairly libertarian orientation, developed under a particular set of public assumptions and expectations, notably that of factuality and unbiased coverage. Yet this did not happen overnight. In the 18th, and even in the early 19th centuries, the American newspaper was partisan, biased, and often susceptible to political and cultural influences on its “news content”—when not dependent on them outright. However, early American editors such as Horace Greeley, James Gordon Bennett, and Henry Raymond advocated a more detached and unbiased “just the facts” style, and American journalism—at least as emanating from the influence of the New York urban dailies in the 1840s and 1850s—gradually came to acquire a sort of public trust. This trust combined Kantian ethical concerns—“tell the truth” and avoid “lies”—with a sort of utilitarian ideal, so that it was critical for the welfare of society to ensure that the public knew “the truth” and “the facts”. The Rawlsian “veil of ignorance” also came into play as the journalistic ethos determined that scrutiny would be applied across the board to all instances of wrongdoing, regardless of who was accused, though those who were merely implicated in news stories would simply be treated as alleged transgressors until they were actually convicted. This approach hit home with news readers, who began to trust what they read in newspapers that took this factual and ethical approach.

Somewhat parenthetically, advertising, which involves a whole other set of ethical issues and concerns, also developed around this time under a much different system of expectations, though it really took off during the early 20th century. The 19th and 20th century journalistic emphasis
on factuality and a minimally biased perspective was also intended to underscore the difference between what was in the news column and what was in the advertisements. An ethos of caveat emptor gradually developed around American advertising, though a degree of public trust began to surface there as well with the implementation of truth-in-advertising regulations. In any case, for the most part, American journalism has successfully managed to demarcate the line between information and advertising for the vast majority of its readership.

This public trust in the North American context was augmented at the onset of the Civil War and the rise of press associations, which led to a set of common standards of news coverage and increased emphasis on factuality as they shared stories over telegraph wires. News consumers across America, notably including President Abraham Lincoln (who was a friend of Greeley’s), came to depend on the newspapers and telegraph for war reports. After the war, the rise of the Industrial Trusts, governmental corruption, a spike in immigration, and “muckrakers” during the Gilded Age (roughly the 1870s to 1900s) fostered the dependence of a nation on accurate news reports and journalists who were willing to investigate to expose crime, corruption and wrongdoing. From Thomas Nast’s Boss Tweed cartoons and Greeley’s campaign against the corrupt Grant administration to Ida Tarbell’s expose of John Rockefeller’s Standard Oil and Jacob Riis’ famous photographic expose How the Other Half Lives, the factual branch of American journalism continued to gain the public trust as a provider of accurate information.

The social-responsibility compromise had been reached in post-Civil War North American journalism. Yet a core tension remained between factuality and sensationalism, as embodied in the later 19th-century tension between news magnates Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. Though this conflict was far from a proverbial “hero-villain” struggle, and both men employed sensationalism and factuality alike—to varying degrees!—Pulitzer’s legacy has been that of establishing a clear ideological line (even if sometimes blurred in practice) between credible news written to inform the public and sensational accounts composed to attract readers and sell more newspapers. Pulitzer became known as a public advocate who sought to make a positive difference in the social world via his newspapers, which built upon that New York tradition of factuality, minimally biased and independently produced journalism. Pulitzer’s ethical emphasis was in recognizing the inherent value in people and social groups, and in defending their human rights by publicly exposing the abuses of those rights. Hence, Pulitzer’s name has
since become synonymous with unbiased and professional news coverage that keeps a sharp eye on those in power and holds them accountable, and furthermore strives to act as a voice for the voiceless.

Hearst, on the other hand, became known as the foremost advocate of “yellow journalism.” Hearst's legacy, rather than of factuality and minimally biased coverage, is one of sensationalism, selling stories to make money, and using the power of “information” to make the sort of difference he envisioned—sparking the Spanish-American War, building and profiting from a vast network of media outlets, and living lavishly in his opulent San Simeon mansion with a multitude of comforts and curiosities alike. One well-known press legend is telling: Hearst reportedly dispatched an artist-photographer to cover the Spanish-American War, who cabled the magnate that nothing noteworthy was happening; Hearst is said to have replied, “You furnish the pictures, I'll furnish the war.” This frequently told account has never been verified, but it nonetheless reflects the Hearst legacy of “yellow journalism,” in which factual information takes a back seat to selling newspapers and making money. This legacy, however (as well as this particular legend), only served as something of a foil for the Pulitzer tradition, which defined itself as the anti-Hearst style of news—truly professional, detached, and analytical news coverage in which the public could trust. In this way, the Pulitzer tradition represented itself as the only truly ethical form of journalism (Ward 2005).

As time went on, broadcasting became established and entered the news market in the 20th century. As broadcasting media developed its own business model in conjunction with the government, then-Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover introduced the Public Interest Doctrine: Radio and TV stations would be operated as if owned by the public, meeting the (largely perceived) needs of the public rather than simply catering to popular whims and tastes (McManus 1992). In fact, the thoroughly utilitarian concern of operation in the public interest became a core requirement of an Federal Communication Commission broadcasting license (Dempsey and Gruver 2009; Dempsey unpublished); local stations were obligated to demonstrate that they were meeting the public interest—often in the form of news and/or airing public service announcements. So as future Pulitzer-tradition journalists in newspapers (Woodward and Bernstein of Watergate fame, et. al.) and broadcasting (Edward R. Murrow, Walter Cronkite, and others) alike continued to emphasize factuality, fairness, and particularly credibility, mainstream American news became established as trustworthy and
credible, while Hearst’s “yellow journalism” largely gravitated to the tabloids on the supermarket shelves and obscure bookstore kiosks.

In this climate, journalism was conceptualized as a profession, schools were founded at various universities in order to train newswriters, and the journalism industry defined itself as an institution deserving of the public trust. This included the establishment of a formal code of ethics for journalists, the formation of professional organizations to promote journalistic standards and ethics, and the ongoing normalization of the norms of the profession through the journalism schools of the day. Credibility became a watchword of American journalism. Standards for what was and wasn’t credible information were established as these social and legal expectations for journalism were formalized—again in largely Kantian style and according to rather categorical expectations. Information was normatively evaluated as true or false, and when supposedly credible “information” was exposed as false, it was subject to sanctions. The news media, print and broadcast alike, had their own credibility and a public trust to uphold.

ETHICS AND ENTERTAINMENT

The contrast with the “art worlds” of entertainment couldn’t have been more distinct, both in terms of history and ethics. American entertainment media had their genesis in the theater and dramatic tradition, which has long functioned in a state of normative tension with society—sometimes underscoring social norms, sometimes calling them into question—and in any case, always operating in a nearly exclusively libertarian production climate. Consequently, the American entertainment industry, often simply (and simplistically) designated as “Hollywood,” developed under a far different system of norms and expectations. In the beginning of American cinema, the Motion Picture Patents Company expected to collect royalties on the use of film equipment, and a number of early producers resisted the MPPC’s heavy-handed tactics, which ranged from lawsuits to (as legend has it) destruction of property and shooting at camera operators. As a result of the harassment, and because they were attracted by the ideal climate and distance from the legal threats and proximity to Mexico, the young movie industry first made its home in southern California in the days before World War I (Wallace 2001).

Hollywood was home to all sorts of aspiring performers and filmmakers, and a wide range of early movies from would-be relatively
clean feature films to pornography were launched from the southern California movie studios. This art world was where people experimented with new values, imaginary possibilities, alternate social settings and fictional worlds—it was the ultimate stage of make-believe! So “Hollywood” came to be known as a glamorous land of Shangri-La—and of course Disneyland!—where America could pretend and “wish upon a star.” It seemed that the young debutantes from Chillicothe, Paducah, and numerous other American small towns could come here to know they were Somebody. “Hollywood,” the land where dreams came true, was where fame and fortune awaited, and where it seemed anyone could become a star, see his or her name in lights, and capture the adoration of virtually the entire world.

Yet the socially dubious end of that range always lay in wait, as mainstream moral considerations, much less ethics of any variety, were of little if any direct concern in this land of make-believe. Then as now, whatever made money and what filmmakers thought people wanted to see was what was filmed. When the aspiring small-town debutantes arrived, they often found they had to wait tables for years before they were noticed, if not play a particular sort of game in which sordid favors of various kinds were done in order to enter the public spotlight. However, in this game of trying to get noticed, let alone win fame and fortune, ethics were a distinct handicap. So, in the public eye, many came to see “Hollywood” as a place that denied and used up those who worked within it, in the antithesis of the ethical affirmation of inherent personal value. Hollywood gained a dualistic reputation: On the one hand, a magical land of imagination where dreams were brought to life, and on the other, a sordid den of squalor where in biblical terms those within it gained the world yet lost their souls. But on neither hand were ethics a key consideration.

To illustrate the ethical complexity within the industry, with implications for public trust outside of it, consider the legendary film producer Alfred Hitchcock. According to Donald Spoto (1999, 301), “Hitch” once dismissively declared during the shooting of The Paradine Case (1947) that “actors are cattle.” A related popular-culture legend also has it that Hitchcock later disavowed the statement’s precise wording, though hardly its substance, saying that he probably meant that all actors should be treated like cattle. However, many actors who worked for him disagree as to whether he actually treated any of them “like cattle”—that is, in a demeaning and exploitative way. Many have said they actually enjoyed the experience, later recalling Hitchcock’s wit and professional
artistry, though conceding that he had a particular working demeanor that could at times be aloof and other times highly demanding. In any case, the Hitchcock legend and many similar tales typify a public suspicion about the nature of “phony, super coney Hollywood”—and a tendency publicly attributed to the various commercial entertainment industries in general—to “use” people working within them in the name of making money.

To combine concepts from Pierre Bourdieu (1993) and Horace Newcomb (1983), the American dramatic tradition, as with much of Western culture, has traditionally been a field of social meaning with highly liminal properties: that is, the dramatic tradition, from which American entertainment is descended, was always a highly experimental social space where meaning has been explored and created by suspending the ordinary social rules that generally apply. In this field of drama, normative testing, questioning and exploration all take place, both on stage as performances experiment with social norms and values and off stage as performers and technicians alike play by a different set of social rules than that which exists in mainstream culture. Not only this, but the liminalization itself is professionalized within the field of meaning within these industries, so that performers, producers, and the like often consider themselves fully trained and qualified explorers and experimenters and subject to an alternative set of norms and values.

Consequently, a different sort of ethics has come about within the various subsectors of the entertainment industry as a whole. In these liminal spheres, ethical rules have largely been determined by the internal norms of the various contexts as well as the aims of those in power, often related to the popular (and financial!) success of the individual or production itself rather than larger social mores. This contributes to a sort of means-ends thinking that differs sharply from the social values outside these art worlds. For instance, it would be simply considered part of the game within the norms of cinematic casting and production for an aspiring starlet to sleep with a movie producer in order to obtain a role, since she’s merely taking a step to advance her career. On the production level, since television producers are money-motivated, many construe a hit in the ratings as the only form of “good TV”—even if the hit is violent and laden with sexual innuendo and language many in the viewing audience deem offensive.

As a result of this reliance on attracting the audience, which is directly related to the production’s profitability, the only “ethics” in play in much of commercial media production is this principle: That which is
good and right generates the most profit possible. Hence, if making the monkey look good attracts consumers and thereby generates revenue for the production company, then making the monkey look good was the good and right thing to do all along—no matter how it was accomplished. Precisely what attracts consumers has been debatable; indeed, the argument can be made (and has been) that entertainment producers rely mainly on their own taste and judgment rather than any in-depth knowledge of their audience, so that “what audiences want” is very much a subjective matter, if not an outright reification used to justify the producer producing what he or she ultimately wants to produce (Gitlin 2000, for instance). Yet to the extent that consumers actually do support various objectionable media objects, their tacit and/or open endorsement entails a share of ethical responsibility for their continued presence.

This, however, is not generally a direct concern of the various entertainment industries, as they are somewhat insulated from their audiences. Performers, writers (including songwriters), directors, producers, and the like have generally played by their own set of on-stage and off-stage rules, including creating their own internal set of ethical expectations. As such, they operate more or less as what Stewart Macaulay called a “private government” (1984, 153) though subject to—but not necessarily accepting of—broadly written legal codes and governance from the outside. Such codes are far from popular and have generally been met with substantial resistance. In fact, such outside governance or other imposition of largely Kantian categorical social rules has been widely seen as stifling to creativity and artistic expression. Consequently, in the highly liminal and libertarian art worlds of entertainment, despite the relative professionalization within the various industries involved, there has been a great deal of reluctance to advance formal codes of ethics of any kind.

At least four notable historical exceptions include the Hays Code of the 1930s (which gradually transformed into the MPAA ratings system), The Television Code in the 1950s, the Parents Music Resource Center effort in the 1980s, and the modern TV Parental Guidelines ratings system, dating from the 1990s. The Hays Code was enacted in the wake of audience concern over ambiguity over objectionable movie content, anti-Naziism and fears of propaganda, and the rising popularity of Mae West and other semi-controversial film content by 1930s standards, which were protested by various watchdog groups. The Code in short promised that films approved for commercial release by the Motion
Picture Audience Association would be sexually and linguistically inoffensive, feature violence and other controversial elements only when essential to the story, and adhere to particular other concerns of the time, such as depicting no interracial marriage, portraying religion and religious ministers positively, and advancing an overall morally uplifting storyline.

The National Association of Broadcasters developed the Television Code in the 1950s, based on existing radio standards, though the radio standards were only generally articulated. Since television (like radio) was considered in the ‘50s commercial television business model as a guest in the living room, and sponsors wanted their products featured in a medium that would draw the largest possible audience, broadcasters established some ground rules to make sure audiences weren’t repelled by the emerging medium—which critics had already began to castigate. Much like the Hays Code, the Television Code established rules for the inoffensiveness of programming and established network Standards and Practices offices, though the NAB wrestled with the issue of penalties for breaking the rules; regulations for the amount of commercial time and rules for children’s programs and family viewing time were also established. By the 1970s, and particularly the deregulatory climate of the early 1980s, particular elements of the Television Code were outmoded, and though the Code itself still exists in terms of the original broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC), ultimately the spirit and practice of these rules alike were discarded (Limberg 2004, Murray 1993).

Significantly, the Hays and Television codes were formal ethical regulations from within the industries. However, the PMRC campaign and the television parental guidelines were pressure from outside, ultimately resulting in the industries agreeing to publish advisories for viewers and listeners. The PMRC stemmed from the 1980s efforts of Tipper Gore and a number of other individuals and groups concerned about the effects of rap music lyrics, particularly obscenities, crude sexual terms, and violent imagery in the rap of 2 Live Crew. In 1985, the music recording industries agreed to publish content advisories on their music warning that some listeners might find the lyrics objectionable (Deflem 1993). The television guidelines stemmed from subsequent worries about objectionable content on television in the wake of an ongoing public debate in the 1990s over TV violence. The same movement that produced The Children’s Television Act of 1990, The Telecommunications Act of 1996, and the well-documented “V-Chip” likewise produced television’s version of the cinema ratings system—which again as the television industry agreed to allow an advisory
notice and rating on their programming, evaluated and placed by an
independent board and displayed briefly at the start of the program (TV
Parental Guidelines Web site; Limberg 2004).

In all four cases, however, the entertainment industry in question
was conceding to a degree of outside pressure from watchdog groups
and concerned media consumers, and adoption of the rules in question
arose primarily not from a desire within the industry to abide by a
particular set of principles but to make peace with a segment of the
audience and appease government regulators, particularly the FCC in the
case of broadcast media. Moreover, the Hays Code was a ploy to avoid
the possibility of even more direct governmental regulation or
intervention in the largely self-policing cinema industry. So these
instances of establishing ethical standards and/or advisories may be more
accurately described as public-relations moves every bit as much (and
possibly even more so) as attempts to advance a formal system of ethics.
The Hays Code and Television Code were higher-level ethical statements,
outlining a set of principles that the industry expected itself to follow in
its production strategies, while the PMRC and Parental Guidelines were
more after-production advisory efforts in response to outside pressure,
but all were attempts to resolve ethical concerns that lay unresolved
between the entertainment industries and society.

In truth, ethical declarations and advisories have been the
exceptions rather than the rule in entertainment. This is partly because
the entertainment industry is so complex and diversified. Within the
industry, there are myriad independent production companies in music
recording, film, radio, television, video gaming, and so forth—all liminal
and libertarian, all exploring their own set of moral and ethical rules
rather than attempting to seek out Kantian universal categorical rules,
function as a public advocate, or operate exclusively in the public interest.
True, broadcasters have to demonstrate a commitment to the public
interest to retain FCC licenses, but an occasional gesture will meet this
requirement—it is hardly a proscription for overall programming.
Broadcasters can make the monkey look good during the vast majority of
their airtime, then air a sporadic public service announcement or turn to
their on-air news staff for a two-minute update, and the requirement is
met.

Moreover, the liminal libertarian tendency that already existed in
modern media has further been amplified and magnified as the Internet
has created an environment in which everyone can potentially be a
creator of information and entertainment alike. As a result, not only has
the difference between the two become highly vague and obscured (a matter to be dealt with shortly), but the normative and ideological-ethical distinctions between entertainment producers and consumers have become much more complex. For some consumers, there is increased opposition to “the media” or “Hollywood,” as if these entities were uniformly vulgar or scandalous. For others, there is increased acceptance of the norms of these liminal art worlds—in fact, many consumers want to know more about what these art worlds are like, and reports of the various exploits of celebrities and behind-the-scenes exposés have never been more popular. As print media has struggled for survival, one of its desperation strategies has been to adopt the “celebrity news” it formerly shunned as “fluff” and “cotton candy”—because the “fluff” has become a staple of various tabloid TV shows as well as Internet news sites and blogs, all catering to the appetite that has emerged for it. Celebrity news has become big business in broadcasting and on the Internet alike.

However, though the gap is narrower than in times past, distinct ethical discrepancies still remain between the ideologies and social rules expressed in the products of these liminal fields of entertainment and the norms and moral codes of their various social settings. Audiences have become dependent on these industries for entertainment, though at the same time, many within the same audiences place little trust in these entertainment outlets as a result of these ethical discrepancies. Some individuals, notably the very young and the largely uneducated, may be counterexamples to this general tendency, as they may place more trust in the entertainment-information-based media more than those who are more mature and knowledgeable. But presumably the majority of media consumers easily see and perceive the proverbial monkey that’s being made up to look good—and retain their skepticism as a result.

It is this same skepticism that occasionally gels into outright opposition from critics and concerned audience members alike—the same sort that produced the PMRC and push for TV Parental Guidelines and results in industry attempts to mollify the concern. Media watchdog groups account for much of the criticism of the entertainment industry. Some groups, such as the Moral Majority, American Family Association, and Focus on the Family, are religious in origin while others such as the Media Research Center, Fairness and Accuracy in Media, and Media Matters, are secular. Some professional researchers such as Robert and Linda Richter (with Stanley Rothman) (1990; 1994), have sharply criticized the media, with conservative media critics such as Michael
Medved, whose provocatively titled *Saving Childhood* (1999) and *Hollywood vs. America* (1992) blasted the contemporary products and intentions of the U.S. entertainment industries. In terms of advertising and its implications for media practice in general, noted media critic Jean Kilbourne has followed a similar path in her *Killing Us Softly* series (2010) and others. Other critics, including the well-known work of Catharine McKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, have condemned pornography and objectification of women in entertainment media as well as in day-to-day life as dehumanizing and exploitative (McKinnon 2006, Dworkin 2000).

The vast majority of media criticism comes from outside the “art worlds.” Occasionally, however, voices such as filmmaker Miguel Valenti’s (2008) even rise within the entertainment industry calling for a degree of self-examination and accountability. So far, there is little if any evidence that the cinema industry has paid any attention to Valenti. As previously indicated, such efforts at ethical self-examination within “Hollywood” succeed primarily when concern from watchdog and audience groups reaches a critical mass. Also, it should be noted, the vast majority of this criticism has been categorical in nature: To the Kantian critics, it is wrong to produce sex, violence, objectionable language, and other offensive depictions in modern media. Consequently, rules should be passed prohibiting such material from being produced—or in a more modern formulation, advising prospective consumers that the production itself features such material.

Yet far from all the critical discourse is strictly Kantian. For instance, Kilbourne, and to a lesser extent, the Lichter group and Medved, also consider social outcomes in a more utilitarian fashion: Is it good for particular social groups, as well as society as a whole, to have these sorts of media messages out in circulation? Kilbourne, like MacKinnon and Dworkin, further critiques the media’s exploitative tendencies in terms of objectifying the female body and dehumanizing women’s inherent value by turning the female body into a mere commodity to be bought and sold. However, the flavor of the overall dialogue of media criticism has remained largely Kantian. The tenor of this dialogue has often produced power struggles over the resulting rules in the liminal industries that tend to resist such regulations and the groups that contend that such codes of conduct are necessary. This in turn results in a lack of public trust, as media consumers recognize that the entertainment industries are in fact playing by their own set of rules. Some consumers shrug off this recognition while others fear it, but the overall reaction is a suspicion of and lack of trust in the entertainment industries as a whole.
Because of this within-industry liminality on the one hand and lack of public trust on the other, many consumers have become jaded and skeptical about the products that result. Knowing that the entertainment media generally exist to sell something to the viewers has brought about a sort of “caveat emptor” ethos that has gradually emerged and become established over the years. In this relationship, the viewing audience has learned to be critical of the entertainment/information it receives, though this poses a distinct problem: Society has become dependent on media, and many individuals can’t help but place trust in various elements of it. We as media consumers are informed and entertained by sources we don’t know if we can trust, though we have to ultimately place our trust in someone somewhere. This creates a set of ethical issues to be explored as consumers try to learn from the media and discern fact from fiction when the two are presented together and the difference between them is not readily apparent.

THE BLURRING OF FACT AND FICTION AND MODERN ETHICS

As those familiar with the modern state of the news industry can attest, contemporary journalism is in a state of transition at best—and at worst, its most cynical critics (prematurely) lament its demise. Whatever position particular critics hold on the state and/or future of the news industry, the core fact remains that the discourse of informational ethics has become much more complex—particularly given that much-embattled modern newspapers have sought for longer than most of them care to admit to attract readers using strategies from the entertainment industry. Advertising, of course, had always been with the American newspaper, complete with the debates over truth in advertising, exploitation, manipulation, influence towards consumerism, and the like (as previously noted, a whole other ethical topic) and journalism had, for most readers, successfully drawn the line between information and attraction/persuasion. But that process of attraction and persuasion remained a key element of American consumer entertainment, and it gradually began to creep into journalism.

Ever since the deregulatory ‘80s, as journalism felt the pinch to make a profit, it increasingly turned to entertainment-related strategies. These hit particularly hard in the most recent economic downturn, which began to force the industry to make harsh choices as early as the first half of 2007. The woes reached a crescendo in the first half of
2009 with the demise of *The Rocky Mountain News*, decision of *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer* to become an online-only publication, reports that even journalistic luminaries such as *The Boston Globe* and its venerable parent *The New York Times* were struggling to survive, and frantic tales of planned or carried out mass layoffs at many other American newspapers. The rise of celebrity news, striking photographs and imagery (particularly of attractive women), items used as “hooks” (also “bait” and “teases”), “fluff pieces,” and even “feel-good” stories to counterbalance the negative news of the day all testify to modern journalism’s desire to draw in readers—at least to their Internet sites if they couldn’t generate more hard copy sales.

Even more than that, however, sensationalism within the news industry was obviously never dead. Even the vaunted New York editors and Joseph Pulitzer himself occasionally resorted to lurid headlines and appeals to emotions rather than logic in order to draw readers. The news war between Pulitzer and Hearst was only a small battle in a much larger conflict in which Hearst seemed to have retaken the upper hand. Adding even more complexity to the issue was the emergence of media hoaxes, in which entertainment productions or public-relations firms could mimic news stories and convince unwary media consumers that stories originating from non-journalism sources were actual “news.” As early as 1938, 23-year-old Orson Welles conned a substantial media audience into believing dramatized yet realistic radio news accounts of a Martian invasion. Various public relations companies discovered in the following decades that effective press-release writing (and in the broadcast context, video news release production) could result in publication as actual news. Even worse, outright malicious falsehoods cropped up, not only as scam artists began to mimic media imagery and conventions in phishing scams and the like—but also as a number of journalists ranging from Janet Cooke to Jayson Blair won prizes at major U.S. newspapers by faking news stories. It has become apparent to American media consumers that fact and fiction, information and entertainment, factual news and sensationalism, and many other dualistic opposed categories can in fact exchange appearances and be easily mistaken for each other.

How does this happen? Sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann are generally credited with first advancing the theory of the social construction of reality (1966), in which people and collectivities build the codes that define reality for themselves—and then use those codes to continue to transmit that knowledge. For Berger and Luckmann, all knowledge is developed, maintained, and transmitted
within social situations, and the social order—and the institutions
developed to maintain social order—are outcomes of human thought and
action. In this perspective, communication is a creative and productive
process, and the means of communication humans have developed in
turn shape their social realities. People shape their realities, which they
then somewhat paradoxically experience, using the products of that
creation. Subsequent thought and scholarship, such as Habermas’
concept of communicative action, merely expands upon this seminal
idea. In short, the commercial mass media are among the social vehicles
by which social construction of “reality” is brought about, and by which
that knowledge is maintained and transmitted.

The concept of verisimilitude dovetails with the process of social
construction. In this explanatory framework, an object of popular
culture, also called a “re-presentation,” references readily recognized
codes of “reality” in the social world and thereby invites the media
consumer to see the re-presentation as real—a process that holds true
across various forms of media to accomplish the social construction and
definition of reality. John Attridge, for instance, shows how author
Joseph Conrad appealed to his readers to foster a sense of realism in his
novels (2010); Lynn Spigel has also demonstrated that family-based
television sitcoms generally reference ordinary and mundane yet familiar
aspects of family life to create a sense of realism with their viewers (1992,
178). In any case, the media object references parts of a media
consumer’s ordinary life that are readily recognizable, constituting an
implicit invitation to the consumer to see the re-presentation of “reality”
in the production as “real” and allow it to define and construct his or her
social reality.

Verisimilitude does NOT mean, of course, that the re-presentation
itself is in fact “real”—it is, after all, only a re-presentation of what is
“real” rather than the original “reality” itself. It simply means that the
object carefully selects parts of known “reality” and relates them to the
media consumer well enough that the consumer is willing to see the
entire re-presentation as “real.” Verisimilitude applies very well to
journalism and entertainment alike, as the news is a direct reference to a
reality that many viewers are familiar with. News stories, of course,
purport to be true accounts of what really happened—referencing
elements of actual events. The facts of these stories are carefully selected,
prioritized, and related; the news consumer in return is asked to believe
that the accounts are credible and factual. In this way, journalism
purports to represent True and Objective Reality, as often expressed by
the venerable Walter Cronkite at the close of his telecasts long ago, “And that’s the way it is.” Journalism thereby helped shape and define social reality for much of 20th century America.

Much of commercial entertainment, particularly genres that strive for consumers’ attention and identification, will actually follow a similar strategy by carefully selecting and prioritizing bits and pieces of what consumers are likely to see as “real,” referencing that “reality” in an identifiable way, and implicitly asking the entertainment consumer to identify with the re-presentation in some way. Consumers in turn will “buy in” in various ways: Being intrigued by the mystery or suspense, developing a parasocial relationship with a main character, becoming a fan of the show, or deciding that the re-presentation “realistically” describes the literal and social world as they’ve experienced it. In the sense of verisimilitude, then, modern media is somewhat comparable in terms of information and entertainment alike; there becomes little ultimate difference.

Likewise, in terms of the media’s role in constructing “reality” for its audience, the blurring of fact and fiction not only intersect in terms of journalism and entertainment, but hold profound ethical implications for audiences. Even were not social construction a factor in the ethical dialogue, the discourse of “what media do to audiences” certainly would be. Granted, media effects research has failed to yield conclusive and definitive results in terms of precise, documented, replicable, and absolute media causation. The uncertainty a couple of decades ago caused the late James Carey to throw up his hands in despair and urge the end of media effects research altogether (1988). Media effects depend on many different conditions, not only including the form and content of the re-presentation itself but psychological and sociological factors among the audience. Subsequent media research in uses and gratifications (in other words, how audiences use media) has demonstrated that audiences use media in many different ways, including for learning and escapism alike. As uses and gratifications researchers know, and as social constructionists (and media psychologists) have established, media likewise play a significant role in the transmission and reinforcement of social values, social learning, and the instruction of normative behavior (Katz, Blumler, and Gurovitch 1973; Ruggiero 2000; Bandura 2001). For instance, Albada (2000) demonstrates in line with social learning that situation comedies provide “life templates” to their viewers that help them make decision about day-to-day interactions. Cultivation theory underscores the point, suggesting that media lay the
groundwork for collective mentalities and behaviors over long periods of
time (Gerbner 1998), and discourse theory establishes that media operate
as a sort of circulatory system of meaning for a given society or group of
people as a whole (Bell and Garrett 1998).

Another complicating factor in the ethical discourse of commercial
media and the definition of social reality is what happens when media
re-presentations succeed and become hits. Media objects that succeed
commercially tends to be replicated. Since media producers enter into a
great deal of guesswork about why audiences enjoy particular programs,
they employ various strategies in order to attempt to avoid failure and
attain success, including attempts to assess collective preference and the
tendency towards recombination—in other words, imitation or recycling
(Gitlin 2000). If a given production or type of production does not find
an audience, and the production or category fails to make money, there
will be few if any attempts to replicate or recombine from that effort.

Hence, though producers are engaged primarily in guesswork
about audience preference and entertainment executives make the
ultimate decisions about what will be publicly distributed (often on the
basis of their own personal tastes), consumers nonetheless bear a share
of the ethical burden in what is produced in the modern media. Media
consumers trusted The New York Times and “Uncle Walter” Cronkite,
made James Cameron’s Avatar and Titanic the top worldwide best-selling
movies of all time, snapped up JK Rowling’s Harry Potter novels by the
truckload, and made prime-time situation comedies from I Love Lucy and
Bewitched to Roseanne and Everybody Loves Raymond smash network hits. In
terms of the running metaphor, if the monkey looks good, and if a
sizeable audience agrees that the monkey looks good (as shown by high
ratings), this audience is ethically responsible for the sudden influx of
similar-looking monkeys.

In any case, it is abundantly clear that media is the pre-eminent
vehicle for public and cultural discourse as well as the social construction
of reality. Media, whether informational or entertainment-based, define
social reality for their audiences, as well as for societies at large. Though
researchers have failed to demonstrate and replicate absolute effects
across the board, the media, by hosting a vast number of re-presentations
that have individual and social meaning, circulate those re-presentations
and associated meanings for media consumers to consider. This has two
outcomes in terms of media ethics. To the extent that consumers and
groups tend to adopt the meanings of the re-presentations, whether on
conscious or unconscious levels, those who produce them have an ethical
responsibility as they construct those re-presentations and meanings, in light of the potential social ramifications. Consumers, who also learn and exercise social responsibility and discretion as they actively use media, also have an ethical obligation to choose media associated with individually and socially positive implications—or at minimum, they are obligated to choose media that would likely be associated with welcomed and desirable attitudes, behaviors, collective mentalities, and social changes. In short, since media teach and transmit values to their audiences, participate in socialization, and help establish normative values, they are certainly subject to ethical considerations; consumers are also ethically obligated to choose their media wisely.

As indicated previously, students in my classes focused more on the latter ethical question of audience responsibility than on the former issue of production regulation. For one thing, most of them tended to be fairly libertarian-minded in terms of entertainment production. There was substantial diversity of opinion among them as to categorical rules of permissibility of content, and a certain reluctance to attempt to establish those rules from outside the industry, which most of them saw as equivalent to censorship. They were not only willing to let the market and audience preference (as perceived and interpreted by the producers) dictate what should and shouldn't be produced, but they were unwilling to even have the appearance of dictating to filmmakers, radio and television producers, music recording executives, and the like what should and shouldn't be produced. So there was relatively little sympathy for a Kantian watchdog-group mentality among them—though much more affinity for themes of exploitation/dehumanization and utilitarianism, which they saw as more profound—and a great deal of respect for preserving the liminality and freedom of creativity and expression inherent in the art worlds of entertainment production.

Furthermore, on the audience-responsibility side of the ethical spectrum, a relatively laissez-faire live-and-let-live mentality among these students in terms of production gave way to a fairly entrenched set of normative expectations and even rules. The primary sentiment among them, in fact, was a fairly Kantian consideration: Caveat emptor, or let the buyer beware. Those who live in a media-saturated world such as ours have to be aware of what they're likely to encounter and grapple with before the fact. There is relatively little sympathy for consumers who stumble in unawares upon films, music and music videos, television shows, internet sites, and the like, and who are then shocked at the content. This is perceived as mere naïveté and is more often than not met
with derision. Among young media consumers, media awareness and literacy, as well as a healthy dose of self-education, are key components of modern media ethics.

Given the perspective of the social construction of reality and socialization/transmission of values, furthermore, the core ethical issues at hand may well not be Kantian alone in nature. Many watchdog groups have long concerned themselves with what media should and should not feature, as is their prerogative—but the deeper ethical issue belongs to John Stuart Mill: What is the social result of media? What norms and values do the re-presentations in question teach and reinforce? What is the greater good for society? If media teach and normalize the values of society, the utilitarian question forces us to consider the probable outcomes as well as examine actual results. Part of that issue is a fairly small number of immediate individual-level observations. For example, a young man, apparently inspired by the Showtime serial-killer series *Dexter*, was at the time I wrote this essay on trial in California, charged with killing his younger brother. Some may argue this is a freak occurrence of media mimicry, since the vast majority of consumers do not immediately and observably “act out” in response to media messages they receive. However, the utilitarian perspective—paired with social learning—suggests that such responses are merely the tip of the iceberg when violence is normalized and glorified in society. If the culture as a whole is taught that serial killers are cool, we should hardly be surprised to see a very few media consumers acting out. The greater social good may be not to normalize and glorify violence to begin with, thereby precluding the few instances of acting out.

This approach would imply restraints on the entertainment industries, which they should ideally impose upon themselves. From the audience perspective, however, the utilitarian argument also suggests that media consumers have an ethical responsibility to not only be aware of media messages and re-presentations that teach and normalize attitudes and behavior that runs counter to the social good, but to avoid consuming them. This is also known as the “off-button” argument, as in “If you don’t like it, turn it off.” This approach would be particularly ethically reasonable for children’s media, since children are still in the process of socialization and would presumably be more profoundly affected by objectionable media than most adult consumers. Responsible parents and other adult caretakers would therefore teach and screen media for the children in their care. This practice, among others, would certainly be responsible media usage for the greater social good.
Yet a further utilitarian problem looms that the “off-button” argument does not help resolve. Some consumers have successfully avoided a particular objectionable media message or re-presentation via the “off-button” method, but others have not. Even though some in the audience have shut their eyes or ignored an item of objectionable media, the value and normalization of that media are still made available to many other willing consumers—and the norms and values of the objectionable media object may affect the individuals who hit their proverbial “off-buttons” anyway. (For instance, say the family with three young attractive teenage girls refuses to watch a violent pornographic cable movie—but the creepy neighbor down the street with an inclination for stalking doesn’t.) The normative influence of objectionable media messages on a social level still affects consumers who consciously avoided that influence on a psychological level. The greater social good requires some additional debate and consideration, so as to avoid media-related problems and conflicts of this nature. Production issues aside, audience members clearly have an ethical responsibility to consider the potential influence of such instances as they consume media and consider how they wish to approach media that at best fails to reflect the values they want in society—and at worst utterly attacks those values.

Another associated ethical issue, as previously indicated, is exploitation and dehumanization, or denial of the inherent value of human beings. Within the entertainment industries, actors and other above-the-line talent may or may not be cattle—but the people in the social world we share should not be. The entertainment industries may do what they will, but it is up to media consumers to decide what to adopt and how to respond to the re-presentations that are offered to us and become part of our social world. This would certainly include avoiding such practices as real-life stereotyping, as Cooke-Jackson and Hansen’s research (2008), since the stereotype would encourage a view of a human being that is distorted, frequently subject to bias and prejudice, and denies his or her inherent value. Even more, the use of the imagery of the female body—and to a lesser extent, that of the trim and athletic male—in modern entertainment media is ethically problematic. When women’s bodies become a commodity to be bought and sold and shown at the media producer’s pleasure and for the producer’s own purposes, women lose their individuality and humanity. (Something of the same could be said for men, though due to the historically established power and status differential between men and women, it is unlikely that men will be as deeply affected.) Consumers of media have an active ethical
responsibility to recognize this process at work and do their best to counteract it by valuing individuals and individual worth rather than allowing the “actors are cattle” approach to dictate their views of the female body and women as a whole.

Finally, there is something of a communitarian echo in this consideration of utilitarian and inherent-value ethics, both on an individual and social level, for media consumers. If a father, mother, or other responsible adult did not want other loved ones to consume a particular media object, should he or she consume it themselves? “Adult media” is something of a thorny issue, but the issue of what would happen to society if everyone consumed violent action flicks or pornography—and were socialized accordingly—is no less worth considering. Moreover, if women do not wish to be exploited, commodified, or dehumanized, should they support or contribute to media that does so, whether as consumers or participants? The mass consumption of fashion, fitness, gossip magazines and web sites is hardly accomplished by men alone. Perhaps the most significant issue of all: Due to this social influence, which affects the society and culture as a whole, should consumers avoid—or oppose—media that depicts ideas, attitudes, and behavior they would not want to see become part of that social influence? Consumers’ ethical obligations about media messages and re-presentations that are not good for us is likely a topic for another essay altogether—but it is a question well worth considering.

CONCLUSION: BRIEF CASE STUDIES AND ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

Ethical conundrums for consumers abound in modern information and entertainment alike, so that locating one to discuss is sometimes as simple as turning on the television or clicking on a current news site. Controversies such as the ongoing tension between Islamic fundamentalists and the West yield plenty of information-based problematics in modern media, such as the publication of the depictions of the Prophet Muhammed despite the creed of Islam and news reports of the building of the mosque near Ground Zero. Religion tends to yield a number of other ethical dilemmas in entertainment as well, such as the depiction of Mormon temple ceremonies on HBO’s Big Love and the skewering of a number of religious groups and issues on South Park and Family Guy. Such cases often produce a fair amount of consumer-oriented debate in Kantian terms, as the issue generally becomes the
appropriateness of the re-presentation and fairness to the group
involved.

However, it is often useful to expand the debate to other venues of
entertainment and ethical approaches. For instance, in my Spring 2010
class, we considered the curious case of “reality TV” darling Kate
Gosselin’s selection AND extended run on *Dancing with the Stars* despite
having little obvious inborn talent as a dancer. Since her original show, *Jon
and Kate Plus 8*, in which she gained fame during the infamous public split
from Jon and their subsequent tussles, Gosselin has made numerous
“reality TV” appearances, ranging from the customary guest appearances
on *Jay Leno* and David Letterman’s programs to co-hosting *The View* and
the Emmy awards. The photogenic and attractive Gosselin, who gained
public sympathy during the split and doesn’t seem to have lost much
since, is clearly being “used” to draw a larger audience—as are those of
us who then tune in to watch her as a result. The ethical question
then becomes: How do we as audiences react to the apparent
exploitation—whether or not Gosselin recognizes it as such—and
obvious ratings ploy? Do we encourage it and enable further exploitation
by watching more?

For another more ethically layered instance, we discussed David
Letterman’s exposure in the fall of 2009 as having carried on multiple
sexual affairs with female staffers—even more curiously brought to light
after an extortion attempt by a television producer. This brought to light
a number of consumer-standpoint ethical questions. First, how do we
reconcile Letterman’s affairs with our modern norms of professionalism,
which discourage sexual liaisons with co-workers, especially those with
less status in the workplace? Though the affairs were apparently
consensual between adults, there was still an underlying sense of
discomfort in terms of the implications for sexual harassment in the
workplace, due to the power imbalance. It remained an open question as
to whether this episode was a setback to the dialogue about sexual
misconduct at work. Second, in terms of Letterman’s family life, is it
ethical to involve his wife, Regina Lesko, who was deeply wounded by the
revelations, in the news of the event? She, unlike her husband, is not a
public figure. Third, is it ethical to employ controversial material of this
sort in programming, given that Letterman’s “apology episode” drew
some of the highest ratings of the season? Are viewers ethically obligated
to turn away from the program and refuse to allow the program to
generate high ratings? Consumers’ sense of exploitation and
manipulation, interestingly, didn’t appear to override their curiosity, which they were more interested in satisfying.

But the most complex case we considered was the multifaceted ethical dilemma posed by Richard Heene, then of Colorado, who deliberately used his family—particularly his then-6-year-old son Falcon—in order to concoct a hoax intended to earn them a “reality show” contract. On October 15, 2009, Richard called authorities, reporting that Falcon was airborne in a large helium Mylar balloon. Law enforcement officials and rescue personnel frantically attempted a rescue, and news media crews observed, before the boy was eventually found in the family’s attic, raising a few eyebrows. Shortly thereafter, not only was it shown that Heene’s wife Mayumi (a Japanese citizen) was in danger of being deported, but in an interview on CNN with veteran journalist Wolf Blitzer, Falcon blurted out that “you guys said we did this for the show.” Heene tried to stammer through an explanation to deflect that disclosure, but the damage was done. As it turned out, Richard Heene—who had previously appeared on *Wife Swap*—wanted to create a “reality TV” show about his family life and had created the entire scenario to attract attention to his family in order to help sell the pitch. Nearly overnight, the Heenes went from media darlings to the embodiment of everything that was wrong with “reality TV” and contemporary entertainment.

Not only was the boy and family clearly used to this end, but the implications of distracting the local police force, rescue teams, and news media are profound. How are media consumers as a whole to deal with the exploitation as well as the attempt to waste taxpayer resources and manipulate the media? The episode resulted in neither quality information nor entertainment, as all most media consumers learned was that the Heene family was led by a manipulative schemer who cared little that his ill-gotten scheme was not only costly but distracted local law enforcement from investigating other crimes. Moreover, rumors surfaced for a few days that another production company was interested in developing the Heenes’ show regardless. This was never documented, but it still gave skeptical consumers more reason to question the ethics and integrity of “reality TV” producers as a whole. Yet, perhaps most perplexing of all, given the “any publicity is good publicity” mentality fostered by the modern entertainment industries, perhaps the resulting infamy to the Heenes still played into what the father wanted all along. Perhaps even this monkey could be made to look good.

How audiences should ethically respond to such an issue is unclear, but nonetheless important in terms of how we as a society address such
behavior, since we can expect to see more of such ethically dubious instances in the future, especially if outrageous behavior results in being rewarded with a “reality show” and the promise of high ratings, fame and profits. In these cases, and others, we see a clear need for a comprehensive ethics of media as the lines between information and entertainment become blurred in our modern age and as media play an ever-more salient role in defining social reality for audiences. This ethical effort is unlikely to emerge from the media production side, due to the liminality and libertarianism that govern the industry’s professional norms. However, by encouraging audiences to consume media critically and ethically, with an eye not only to categorical rules of content but to the effects in terms of human value and social meaning, there is hope that media in turn will become more ethically oriented.

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