

STATEMENT BASED ON THE HELSINKI ETHICS CONFERENCE

(Helsinki, Finland, 3–4 September 2020)

Communication professionals in different fields are facing similar challenges, including issues of a global scale. Addressing these issues and finding solutions require both local and international collaboration.

Based on the talks and discussions at the Helsinki Ethics Conference, we have identified four central types of ethical challenges that communication professionals face in the current environment. We also propose starting points for solutions to be developed as this forum continues.

DISINFORMATION, PROPAGANDA AND HATE SPEECH

Disinformation, rampant on social media platforms, leads to real-life consequences. Free speech is turned against itself by attempts to silence critical voices by hate speech, harassment and threats. The business model of social media is not to disseminate quality information – often the contrary. Meanwhile the future of journalism and fact-checking is heavily clouded.

Communication professionals should pay attention to their own choices. Is the information used as part of communication really verified? Even speculation draws attention to unreliable sources. Can attention be turned back to reliable sources? Communication professionals should reconsider placing content and advertising on platforms that do not care about the quality of information or do not curtail hate speech.

ERODING TRUST AND POLARIZATION

The Western world is facing increasing political polarization. Trust towards institutions of decision-making and the production of information and knowledge is in decline. In several countries, we have witnessed attempts of state control of journalists and institutions of media and communication. Attention is garnered with provocation, exaggeration, and concentration on the negative, often aided by social media platforms.

The role of many communication professionals, in particular journalists, is to take a critical stance towards the decisions and communications of others. Yet, concentration on and the exaggeration of errors and mistakes can lead to further cynicism. Maintaining trust is the responsibility of all communication professionals. While retaining the critical distance and independence that is necessary for the functioning of free, democratic societies, communication professionals should be alert to their role: are they developing or impairing trust?

AMBIGUITY OF ROLES AND INTERESTS

The boundaries between traditional communication professions – such as journalism, public relations, corporate communications, and advertising – are blurring. Businesses and organizations produce their own media content, and many professionals act in different roles. Audiences may have increasing difficulties recognizing the differences between commercial and journalistic forms of communication.

Communication professionals need to be constantly aware of the changes in the current media and communication environment. Are the current means of implementing transparency concerning interests and roles in communication sufficient? What kind of practices need to be adopted and developed on the level of individuals, channels and institutions to ensure transparency?

GLOBAL ISSUES

In an interdependent world, the ethical issues faced by all businesses and organizations involve questions of global justice. Communication itself no longer has national boundaries. There is a need for the development of global and regional ethical codes and practices and their broad adoption. However, these codes will not reach broad awareness and acceptance without local engagement, education and training.

Communication professionals should explore possibilities of developing global and regional ethical codes and of ensuring the binding nature of these codes. However, this development needs to be supported by professionals coming together locally and nationally, and on an organizational level. In what further ways could businesses, organizations, and societies provide and support education and training in ethics and professional conduct?

Dr. Henrik Rydenfelt

Chair, Statement committee

Prof. emer. Dr. Günter Bentele

University of Leipzig

Prof. Mats Bergman

Member, Council for Ethics of Communication, Finland

Prof. Dr. Sabine Einwiller

Chair, Austrian Public Relations Ethics Council

Eero Hyvönen

Chair, Council for Mass Media, Finland

Prof. Lars Rademacher

Chair, German Public Relations Council