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Perspectives on Ethics in Persuasion

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Case Study

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LEARNING GOALS

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Discuss the importance of ethical issues and standards in the persuasion process.
2. Recognize the complexity of making ethical judgments about persuasion.
3. Apply five ethical perspectives for judging persuasion.
4. Apply specific ethical criteria for assessing political communication and commercial advertising.
5. Recognize how moral exclusion functions in unethical persuasion to harm people of diverse nations, cultures, religions, genders, and sexual orientations.
6. Recognize how interactive and social network media pose significant ethical issues for persuasion.
7. Understand the distinction between lying and deception.
8. Start developing your own workable and justifiable ethical framework or code of ethics for evaluating your persuasive choices of means and ends and those of other persuaders.

Students enrolled in persuasion courses frequently are preparing for careers in advertising, sales, law, journalism, business, or politics. But students interested in such careers may be surprised by the extremely negative perceptions people have of the ethics and honesty of persons in such professions. The November 2010 Gallup Poll of perceived honesty and ethics of 22 professions ranks the following 11, in descending order, as lowest in perceived ethicality: bankers, TV reporters, newspaper reporters, local officeholders, lawyers, business executives, state officeholders, advertising practitioners, members of Congress, and finally, tied at the bottom, lobbyists and car salespeople (see Weblink 2.1). (You can access this and all of the other chapter 2 weblinks through your companion website for *Persuasion*, chapter 2 resources.)

Evidence abounds that supports public concern over the decline of ethical behavior. A May 2010 Gallup Poll of citizen perceptions of moral values in the United States found that 83 percent of respondents rated the current state of moral values as only fair/poor and 76 percent thought the level of moral values was declining (see Weblink 2.2). The Josephson Institute of Ethics conducted a 2009 survey of almost 7,000 persons ranging in age from teenage to over fifty. A significant conclusion was that the "vast majority of respondents of all ages believe that young people lie, cheat, and steal more than previous generations but teens and young adults are considerably more likely to believe this than older adults" (see Weblink 2.3).

The 2010 Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth by the Josephson Institute was a survey of over 40,000 high school students. The results show a puzzling contradiction. On the one hand over 92 percent of those surveyed said that it is "important for me to be a person of good character," that "trust and honesty" are important in personal relationships and in the workplace, and that they are satisfied with their own "ethics and character." On the other hand, in stark contrast, 80 percent admitted that they had lied to a parent (54 percent two or more times) and 61 percent lied to a teacher (34 percent two or more times) about something significant in the past year. Eighty percent admitted (60 percent two or more

times) that they had copied another's homework. And 10 percent admitted they lied on three to ten questions in the survey (see again Weblink 2.3). In his book, *The Cheating Culture,* David Callahan (2004) documents a "pattern of widespread cheating throughout U.S. society," observes that people "not only are cheating in more areas but also are feeling less guilty about it," and concludes that most of the cheating "is by people who, on the whole, view themselves as upstanding members of society" (pp. 12–14).

CASE STUDY

Imagine that you are an audience member listening to a speaker—call him Mr. Bronson. His aim is to persuade you to contribute money to the cancer research program of a major medical research center. Suppose that, with one exception, all the evidence, reasoning, and motivational appeals he employs are valid and above suspicion on any ethical grounds. However, at one point in his speech, Bronson knowingly uses a set of false statistics to scare you into believing that, during your lifetime, there is a much greater probability of you getting some form of cancer than is actually the case.

To help our analysis of the ethics of this hypothetical persuasive situation, consider these issues. If you, or society at large, view Bronson's persuasive goal as worthwhile, does the worth of that goal justify his use of false statistics as one means to achieve his end? Would Bronson's use of a fear appeal (emotional scare tactic) be ethical if the statistics were true rather than false? Does the fact that he consciously chose to use false statistics make a difference in your evaluation? If he used the false statistics out of ignorance or a failure to check his sources, how might your ethical judgment be altered, if at all? Should Bronson be condemned as an unethical person or an unethical speaker, or, in this instance, just for use of a specific unethical technique?

Carefully consider the standards you would employ to make your ethical judgment of Bronson. Are your standards purely pragmatic? (In other words, should Bronson avoid false statistics because he might get caught?) Are they societal in origin? (If he gets caught, his credibility as a representative would be weakened with this and future audiences, or his getting caught might weaken the credibility of other cancer society representatives.) Should he be criticized for violating an implied ethical agreement between you and him? (You might not expect a representative of a famous research institute to use questionable techniques, and so you would be especially vulnerable.) Finally, should his conscious use of false statistics be considered unethical because you are denied the accurate, relevant information you need to make an intelligent decision on an important public issue?

In what ways does Bronson's intentional use of false statistics as a scare tactic appeal to *both* information processing routes of the ELM model of persuasion? In what ways might Rank's model of persuasive strategies and tactics be helpful in judging the ethics of Bronson's false appeal?

IMPORTANCE OF ETHICS

As receivers and senders of persuasion, we have the responsibility to uphold appropriate ethical standards for persuasion, to encourage freedom of inquiry and expression, and to promote public debate as crucial to democratic decision making. To achieve these goals, we must understand their complexity and recognize the difficulty of achieving them. One purpose of this chapter is to stimulate you to make reasoned choices among ethical options in developing your own positions or judgments.

Ethical issues focus on value judgments concerning degrees of right and wrong, virtue and vice, and ethical obligations in human conduct. Persuasion, as one type of human behavior, always contains potential ethical issues, for several reasons:

- In persuasion, one person, or a group of people, attempts to influence other people by altering their beliefs, attitudes, values, and actions.
- Persuasion requires us to make conscious choices among ends sought and rhetorical means used to achieve the ends.

FIGURE 2.1 This Coca Cola ad for its *BURN* high energy drink was used in Italy. If this ad were used in the United States, would it be considered as unethical, just in poor taste, or just humorous? Why?

SOURCE: Courtesy of Advertising Archives.

- Persuasion necessarily involves a potential judge—any or all of the receivers, the persuader, or an independent observer.

As a receiver and sender of persuasion, you will evaluate the ethics of a persuasive instance based on the ethical standards you are using. You may even choose to ignore ethical judgment entirely. People often cite several justifications to avoid direct analysis and resolution of ethical issues in persuasion:

- Everyone knows the appeal or tactic is unethical, so there is nothing to talk about.
- Only success matters, so ethics are irrelevant to persuasion.
- Ethical judgments are matters of individual personal opinion, so there are no final answers.

However, potential ethical questions exist regardless of how they are answered. Whether you wish it or not, consumers of persuasion generally will judge your effort, formally or informally, in part by their own relevant ethical criteria. If for no other reason than the pragmatic motivation of enhancing your chance of success, you would do well to consider the ethical standards held by your audience. This chapter should increase your understanding of how ethics relates to our networked, interactive, media-saturated world, our multicultural global world, and a world of doublespeak and propaganda (see Figure 2.1).

Now we turn to the concept of ethical responsibility. What is it and what are some of its components?

ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF PERSUADERS

Persuaders' ethical responsibilities can stem from statuses or positions they have earned or have been granted, from commitments (promises, pledges,

agreements) they have made, or from the consequences (effects) of their communication for others. **Responsibility** includes the elements of fulfilling duties and obligations, of being accountable to other individuals and groups, of adhering to agreed-upon standards, and of being accountable to one's own conscience. But an essential element of responsible communication, for both sender and receiver, is the exercise of thoughtful and deliberate judgment. That is, the responsible communicator carefully analyzes claims, soundly assesses probable consequences, and conscientiously weighs relevant values. In a sense, a responsible communicator is "response-able." She or he exercises the ability to respond (is responsive) to the needs and communications of others in sensitive, thoughtful, fitting ways (Freund, 1960; Niebuhr, 1963; Pennock, 1960; Pincoffs, 1975).

Whether persuaders seem intentionally and knowingly to use particular content or techniques is a factor that most of us consider in judging communication ethicality. If a dubious communication behavior seems to stem more from an accident, a slip of the tongue, or even ignorance, we may be less harsh in our ethical assessment. For most of us, it is the *intentional* use of ethically questionable tactics that merits the harshest condemnation.

On the other hand, we might contend that, in argumentative and persuasive situations, communicators have an ethical obligation to double-check the soundness of their evidence and reasoning before they present it to others; sloppy preparation is no excuse for ethical lapses. A similar view might be advanced concerning elected or appointed government officials. If they use obscure or jargon-laden language that clouds the accurate and clear representation of ideas, even if it is not intended to deceive or hide, they are ethically irresponsible. Such officials, according to this view, should be obligated to communicate clearly and accurately with citizens in fulfillment of their governmental duties. As a related question, we can ask whether sincerity of intent releases persuaders from their ethical responsibility to use fair means and effects. Could we say that if Adolf Hitler's fellow Germans had judged him to be sincere, they need not have assessed the ethics of his persuasion? In such cases, evaluations are probably best carried out by appraising sincerity and ethicality separately. For example, a persuader sincere in intent might use an unethical strategy.

American culture emphasizes dual concerns for maximizing the latitude of freedom of communication and for promoting responsible exercise of that freedom. In the United States we have a long history of First Amendment and Supreme Court protection of freedom of speech and press. At the same time, citizens generally expect that freedom to be used in ethically responsible ways. Often we may observe or experience a tension between communication freedom and responsibility, and we have to decide which one should take precedence in a particular situation.

The **freedom versus responsibility tension** might occur when we, as individuals, carry to an extreme the now traditional view that the best test of the soundness of our ideas is their ability to survive in the free and open public "marketplace" of ideas. We might take the mistaken view that, as individuals, we have no responsibility to test the ethicality of our persuasive techniques and goals before we present them. We incorrectly assume that the logical and ethical soundness of our ideas need only to be evaluated through their ability to survive in the marketplace in competition with other ideas and differing viewpoints. Such a view could lead each of us to ignore our ethical responsibilities as persuaders because, supposedly, the marketplace ultimately will render the necessary judgments. However, we must remember that while we do have First Amendment protection of our persuasion, each of us also has the responsibility to exercise that freedom in an ethical manner (adapted from Meiklejohn, 1948, pp. 73–74).

Questions about how far persuaders should go in adapting their message to particular audiences focus on a special type of ethical responsibility. We now examine this issue.

Adaptation to the Audience

What are the ethics of adapting to the audience? Most persuaders seek to secure some kind of response from receivers. To what degree is it ethical

for them to alter their ideas and proposals to adapt to the needs, capacities, values, and expectations of their audience? To secure acceptance, some persuaders adapt to an audience to the extent of so changing their own ideas that the ideas are no longer really theirs. These persuaders merely say what the audience wants to hear, regardless of their own convictions. During the 2007–2008 Republican presidential primary campaign, for example, candidate Mitt Romney was criticized by opponents and the media for changing his views on significant issues depending on the audience he attempted to persuade. One political cartoonist (Horsey, 2007) satirically depicted Romney as saying: "And on torture, immigration, and taxes, I'll adopt any viewpoint that'll get me elected. So you don't need to worry about my beliefs. I don't have any." In contrast, some persuaders go to the opposite extreme of making little or no adaptation to their audience. They do not take serious account of the nature of their audience, no matter whether that audience is much like them or whether it reflects cultural or religious diversity. To the audience, the speaker, writer, or advertisement seems unconnected to them or unconcerned about them.

Some degree of adaptation for specific audiences in language choice, evidence, value appeals, organization, and communication medium is a crucial part of successful and ethical persuasion. No absolute rule can be set down here. Persuaders must decide the ethical intermediate point between their own idea in its pure form and that idea modified to achieve maximum impact with the audience. The search is for an appropriate point between two undesirable extremes—the extreme of saying only what the audience desires and will approve, and the extreme of complete lack of concern for and understanding of the audience. Both extremes are ethically irresponsible (Booth, 2004, pp. 50–54). In this era of heightened awareness of ethnic, racial, and religious diversity, persuaders face significant practical and ethical choices concerning the appropriate degree of audience adaptation. And just because we may use informal SNM to influence others does not lessen our ethical responsibilities in adapting to our audience of one or many.

A frequent ethical question facing persuaders is: Does the end justify the means? How should we answer that question? What are some guidelines for answering it?

The Ethics of Ends and Means

In assessing the ethics of persuasion, does the end justify the means? Does the necessity of achieving a goal widely acknowledged as worthwhile justify the use of ethically questionable techniques? We must be aware that the persuasive means employed can have cumulative effects on receivers' thoughts and decision-making habits, apart from and in addition to the specific end that the communicator seeks. No matter what purpose they serve, the arguments, appeals, structure, and language we choose do shape the audience's values, thinking habits, language patterns, and level of trust.

To say that the ends do not *always* justify the means is different from saying that the ends never justify means. The persuader's goal probably is best considered as one of a number of potentially relevant ethical criteria from which we select the most appropriate standards. Under some circumstances, such as threats to physical survival, the goal of personal or national security may *temporarily* take precedence over other criteria. In general, however, we can best make mature ethical assessments by evaluating the ethics of persuasive techniques apart from the worth and morality of the persuader's specific goal. We can strive to judge the ethics of means and ends *separately*. In some cases, we may find ethical persuasive tactics employed to achieve an unethical goal; in other cases, unethical techniques are used in the service of an entirely ethical goal.

Consider this report in the *Chicago Tribune* (April 12, 2000, sec. 1, p. 3):

> More than one-third of doctors surveyed nationwide admit deceiving insurance companies to help patients get the care they need. Their tactics include exaggerating the severity of an illness to help patients avoid being sent home early from

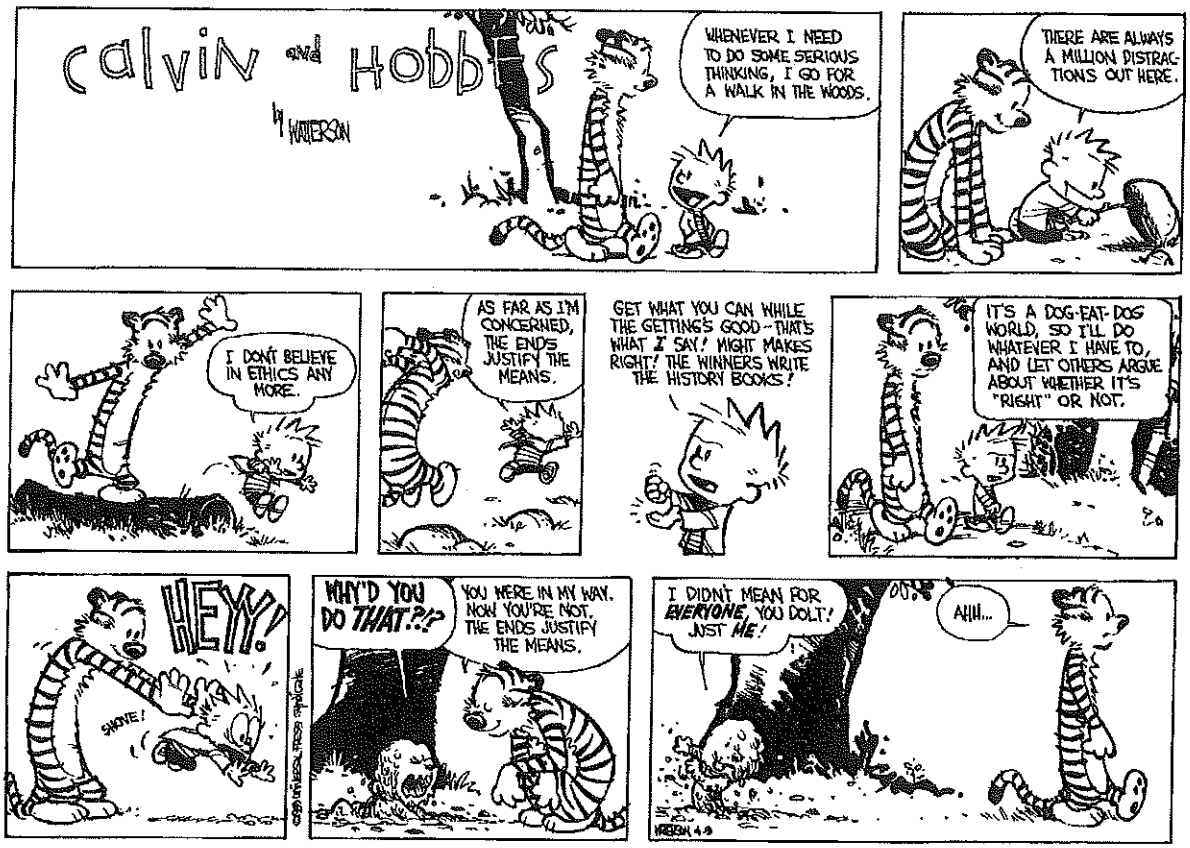

FIGURE 2.2 How might Bovee's questions apply for evaluating the justifications here?

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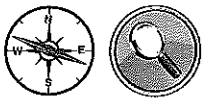


the hospital, listing an inaccurate diagnosis on bills and reporting non-existent symptoms to secure insurance coverage. More than one-quarter, 28.5 percent, said it is necessary to "game" the system to provide high-quality care.

Does the end of securing high-quality care for patients justify use of such deceptive communication tactics? Why or why not?

Although discussed in the context of journalistic ethics, the six questions suggested by Warren Bovee (1991) can serve as useful probes to determine the degree of ethicality of almost any means-ends relationship in persuasion (see Figure 2.2).

Here are the questions in paraphrased form:

1. Are the means truly unethical/morally evil or merely distasteful, unpopular, unwise, or ineffective?
2. Is the end truly good, or does it simply appear good to us because we desire it?
3. Is it probable that the ethically bad or suspect means actually will achieve the good end?
4. Is the same good achievable using other more ethical means if we are willing to be creative, patient, determined, and skillful?
5. Is the good end clearly and overwhelmingly better than the probable bad effects of the

means used to attain it? Bad means require justification whereas good means do not.

6. Will the use of unethical means to achieve a good end withstand public scrutiny? Could the use of unethical means be justified to those most affected by them or to those most capable of impartially judging them?

Perhaps now we can better answer the question: In persuasion, does the end justify the means? Certainly we see more clearly some of the issues and options involved.

The ethics of persuasion are important both for persuaders and for receivers of persuasion. We turn now to special ethical responsibilities for audiences.

ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF RECEIVERS

What are your ethical responsibilities as a receiver of or respondent to persuasion? An answer to this question stems in part from the image we hold of the persuasion process. Receivers bear little responsibility if the persuader views them as passive and defenseless receptacles, as mindless blotters uncritically accepting ideas and arguments. If audience members actually behave as viewed by the persuader, then they have little or no responsibility to understand accurately and evaluate critically. In this view, they have minimal power of choice and almost automatically must agree with the persuader's arguments. In contrast, we can see persuasion as a transaction or co-creation in which both persuaders and persuadees bear mutual responsibility to participate actively in the process. This image of persuadees as active participants suggests several responsibilities, perhaps best captured by two phrases: (1) reasoned skepticism and (2) appropriate feedback.

Reasoned skepticism includes a number of elements. It represents a balanced position between the undesirable extremes of being too open-minded or gullible, on the one hand, and being too closed-minded or dogmatic, on the other. You are not simply an unthinking blotter "soaking up" ideas and arguments. Rather, you exercise your critical thinking capacities actively to search for meaning, to analyze and synthesize, and to judge soundness and worth. You do something to and with the information you receive: You process, interpret, and evaluate it. Also, you inform yourself about issues being discussed, and you tolerate, even seek out, divergent and controversial viewpoints, the better to assess what is being presented.

As a receiver of persuasion, you must realize that your accurate interpretation of a persuader's message may be hindered by attempts to impose your own ethical standards or cultural values on the persuader. Your immediate, gut-level ethical judgments may cause you to distort the intended meaning. Only after reaching an understanding of the persuader's ideas can you reasonably evaluate the ethics of his or her persuasive strategies or purposes.

In this era of distrust of the truthfulness of public communication, reasoned skepticism also requires that you combat the automatic assumption that most public communication is untrustworthy. Just because a communication is of a certain type or comes from a certain source (e.g., a government official, political candidate, news media figure, controversial blog, or advertiser), it must not automatically, without evaluation, be rejected as tainted or untruthful. Clearly, you must always exercise caution in acceptance and care in evaluation, as emphasized throughout this book. Using the best evidence available, you arrive at your best judgment. However, to condemn a message as untruthful or unethical solely because it stems from a suspect source is a type of judgment that threatens the soundness of our decisions. If we reject a message, it must be after, not before, we evaluate it. Like a defendant in a courtroom, public communication must be presumed to be ethically innocent until it has been proved "guilty." However, when techniques of persuasion do weaken or undermine the confidence and trust necessary for intelligent, public decision making, we can condemn them as unethical.

As an active participant in the persuasion process, you need to provide appropriate feedback to persuaders. Otherwise, persuaders are denied the

relevant and accurate information they need to make decisions. Your response, in most situations, should be an honest and accurate reflection of your true comprehension, beliefs, feelings, or judgment. It might be verbal or nonverbal, oral or written, immediate or delayed. A response of understanding, puzzlement, agreement, or disagreement could be reflected through your facial expressions, gestures, posture, inquiries, and statements during question-and-answer periods and through letters or e-mails to editors or advertisers. In some cases, because of your expertise on a subject, you may even have an obligation to respond and provide feedback while other receivers remain silent. You need to decide whether the degree and type of your feedback are appropriate for the subject, audience, and occasion of the persuasion. For instance, to interrupt with questions, or even to heckle, might be appropriate in a few situations but irresponsible in most others.

SOME ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES

We will briefly explain five major ethical perspectives as potential viewpoints for analyzing ethical issues in persuasion. As categories, these perspectives are not exhaustive, mutually exclusive, or given in any order of precedence. For a more extensive discussion, see Johannesen, Valde, and Whedbee (2008).

As a receiver of persuasion, you can use one or a combination of such perspectives to evaluate the ethicality of a persuader's use of language (such as metaphors and ambiguity) or of evidence and reasoning. You can also use them to assess the ethics of psychological techniques (such as appeals to needs and values) or the appeal to widely held cultural images and myths. The persuasive tactics of campaigns and social movements can also—indeed must—be subjected to ethical scrutiny.

Human Nature Perspectives

Human nature perspectives probe the essence of human nature by asking what makes us fundamentally human. They identify unique characteristics of human nature that distinguish us from so-called lower forms of life, characteristics that we can then use as standards for judging the ethics of persuasion. Among them are the capacity to reason, to create and use symbols, to achieve mutual appreciative understanding, and to make value judgments. The underlying assumption is that we should protect and nurture such uniquely human characteristics so that persons better can achieve their individual potential. We can assess the degree to which a persuader's appeals and techniques either foster or undermine the development of a fundamental human characteristic. Whatever the political, religious, or cultural context, a person would be assumed to possess certain uniquely human attributes worthy of promotion through communication. A technique that dehumanizes, that makes a person less than human, would be unethical.

In 1990 in Florida, a U.S. district court judge declared obscene the album *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* by the rap group 2 Live Crew. But in a local trial in Florida that same year, three members of the group were acquitted of obscenity charges for performing the songs. These incidents are part of a larger controversy concerning lyrics that explicitly refer to the sexual and physical abuse and debasement of women and that attack ethnic groups. For example, lyrics on the *Nasty* album vividly describe the bursting of vaginal walls, the forcing of women to have anal or oral sex or to lick feces, and such acts as urination, incest, and group sex. Similarly sexually violent lyrics can be found in songs by such individuals and groups as Judas Priest, Great White, Ice-T, and Guns n' Roses. And bigotry against immigrants, homosexuals, and African Americans surfaces in the Guns n' Roses song, "One in a Million." Can you think of lyrics to current songs or rap that are similar to those just discussed?

Regardless of whether such lyrics are judged obscene or whether they are protected by the freedom-of-speech clause of the First Amendment, many would say that they should be condemned as unethical (Johannesen, 1997). Such lyrics treat women not as persons but as objects or body parts to be manipulated for the selfish satisfaction of

males. Thus, they dehumanize, depersonalize, and trivialize women, they celebrate violence against them, and they reinforce inaccurate and unfair stereotypes of women, homosexuals, and ethnic groups. How do you believe a human nature perspective on communication ethics might be used to assess such lyrics?

Political Perspectives

The implicit or explicit values and procedures accepted as crucial to the health and growth of a particular political system are the focus of **political perspectives**. Once we have identified these essential values for a political system, we can use them to evaluate the ethics of persuasive means and ends within that system. The assumption is that public communication should foster achievement of these basic political values; persuasive techniques that retard, subvert, or circumvent the values should be condemned as unethical. Different political systems usually embody differing values leading to differing ethical judgments. Within the context of U.S. representative democracy, for example, various analysts pinpoint values and procedures they deem fundamental to the healthy functioning of our political system and, thus, values that can guide ethical scrutiny of persuasion therein. Such values and procedures include enhancement of citizens' capacity to reach rational decisions, access to channels of public communication and to relevant and accurate information about public issues, maximization of freedom of choice, tolerance of diversity and dissent, honesty in presenting motivations and consequences, and thoroughness and accuracy in presenting evidence and alternatives.

Hate speech is a broad label that includes communications that degrade, belittle, humiliate, or disrespect individuals and groups based on their race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sex, or sexual orientation. Hate speech truly warrants our concern as an issue central to respect for diversity in our nation. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the issue of hate speech on college and university campuses illustrated the tension between the right of freedom of speech and the ethically responsible exercise of that right. On one campus, eight Asian-American students were harassed for almost an hour by a group of football players, who called them "Oriental faggots." On another campus, white fraternity members harassed a black student by chanting, "coon," "nigger," and "porch monkey." On yet another campus, a white male freshman was charged under the school's speech code with racial harassment for calling five black female students "water buffaloes."

In response to hate speech incidents, many colleges and universities instituted speech codes to punish hateful and offensive public messages. Among the forms of expression punishable at various schools are these:

- the use of derogatory names, inappropriately directed laughter, inconsiderate jokes, and conspicuous exclusion of another person from conversation
- language that stigmatizes or victimizes individuals or that creates an intimidating or offensive environment
- face-to-face use of epithets, obscenities, and other forms of expression that by accepted community standards degrade, victimize, stigmatize, or pejoratively depict persons based on their personal, intellectual, or cultural diversity
- extreme or outrageous acts or communications intended to harass, intimidate, or humiliate others on the basis of sex, sexual orientation, race, color, or national origin, thus causing them severe emotional distress.

We call your attention to two websites that provide reliable information about hate groups that promote hate speech. Check the Hate Groups Map on the Southern Poverty Law Center website and surf its various links to see the nature and extent of such groups (see Weblink 2.4). On the Anti-Defamation League website (see Weblink 2.5) type in the search window: poisoning the web. Then click on "Table of Contents" to surf the various listings.

Whether hate speech is protected by the First Amendment and whether campus speech codes are constitutional, we should evaluate specific instances

of hate speech for their degree of ethicality (Johannesen, 1997). We can use various ethical perspectives (such as human nature), but how might we use the values and procedures central to a U.S. democratic political perspective to judge hate speech?

Situational Perspectives

To make ethical judgments from a **situational perspective**, it is necessary to focus *regularly and primarily* on the elements of the specific persuasive situation at hand. Virtually all perspectives (those mentioned here and others) make some allowances, on occasion, for the modified application of ethical criteria in special circumstances. However, an extreme situational perspective routinely makes judgments only in light of *each different context*. This perspective minimizes criteria from broad political, human nature, religious, or other perspectives, and avoids absolute and universal standards (see Figure 2.3). Among the concrete contextual factors relevant to making a purely situational ethical evaluation are these:

- the role or function of the persuader for receivers
- expectations held by receivers concerning such matters as appropriateness and reasonableness
- the degree of receivers' awareness of the persuader's techniques
- goals and values held by receivers
- the degree of urgency for implementing the persuader's proposal
- ethical standards for communication held by receivers.

From an extreme situational perspective, for instance, we might argue that an acknowledged leader in a time of clear crisis has a responsibility to rally support and thus could employ so-called emotional appeals that circumvent human processes of rational, reflective decision making. Or a persuader might ethically use techniques such as innuendo, guilt by association, and unfounded name-calling as long as the receivers both recognize and approve of those methods.

FIGURE 2.3
How might situational ethics apply here?

SOURCE: Berry's World: © by NEA, Inc.

Legal Perspectives

From a **legal perspective**, illegal communication behavior also is unethical, but that which is not specifically illegal is ethical. In other words, legality and ethicality are considered synonymous. This approach certainly has the advantage of making ethical decisions simple: We need only measure communication techniques against current laws and regulations to determine whether a technique is ethical. We might, for example, turn for ethical guidance to the regulations governing advertising set forth by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) or the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Or we might use Supreme

Court or state legislative criteria defining obscenity, pornography, libel, or slander to judge whether a particular message is unethical on those grounds.

However, many people are uneasy with this legalistic approach to communication ethics. They contend that obviously there are some things that are legal but ethically dubious. And some social protesters for civil rights and against the Vietnam War during the 1960s and 1970s admitted that their actions were illegal but contended that they were justifiable on ethical and moral grounds. Persons holding such views reject the idea that ethicality and legality are synonymous, view ethicality as much broader than legality, and argue that not everything that is unethical should be made illegal.

To what degree, then, can or should we enforce ethical standards for communication through laws or regulations? What degrees of soundness might there be in two old but seemingly contrary sayings: "You can't legislate morality" and "There ought to be a law"? In the United States today, very few ethical standards for communication are codified in laws or regulations. As we have indicated, FCC or FTC regulations on the content of advertising represent the governmental approach. But such examples are rare compared with the large number of laws and court decisions specifying the boundaries of freedom of speech and press in our society. Rather, our society applies ethical standards for communication through the indirect avenues of group consensus, social pressure, persuasion, and formal-but-voluntary codes of ethics.

Controversies surrounding computer communication on the Internet illustrate not only the tension between freedom and responsibility but also the pressures to apply legalistic approaches to ethics and to create formal codes of ethics. Should you be free to say or depict anything you want, without restriction, on the Internet, in e-mail, in blogs, or in SNM? What is your view on how ethical responsibility for computer communication on the Internet should be promoted? Through laws? Through institutional and professional codes of ethics (Box 2.1)?

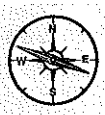
Dialogical Perspectives

Dialogical perspectives emerge from current scholarship on the nature of communication as dialogue rather than as monologue. From such perspectives, the attitudes participants in a communication situation have toward each other are an index of the ethical level of that communication. Some attitudes are held to be more fully human, humane, and facilitative of personal self-fulfillment than others (see Johannesen, 1971; Johannesen, Valde, & Whedbee, 2008; Stewart & Zediker, 2000).

Communication as dialogue is characterized by such attitudes as honesty, concern for the welfare and improvement of others, trust, genuineness, open-mindedness, equality, mutual respect, empathy, humility, directness, lack of pretense, nonmanipulative intent, sincerity, encouragement of free expression, and acceptance of others as individuals with intrinsic worth regardless of differences of belief or behavior.

Communication as monologue, in contrast, is marked by such qualities as deception, superiority, exploitation, dogmatism, domination, insincerity, pretense, personal self-display, self-aggrandizement, judgmentalism that stifles free expression, coercion, possessiveness, condescension, self-defensiveness, and

BOX 2.1 A Legalistic Perspective?



University officials, perhaps on your campus, have debated whether to apply to the Internet and e-mail activities of students existing campus speech codes that prohibit hate speech and harassment, or whether to formulate special codes of computer communication ethics to guide student use. On your campus, what official policies (set how and by whom?) govern ethically responsible communication on the Internet? How adequately and appropriately do these policies speak to specific issues of communication ethics? Do these policies actually seem to address matters of legality more than of ethicality?

the view of others as objects to be manipulated. In the case of persuasion, then, we examine the persuader's techniques and presentation to determine the degree to which they reveal an ethical dialogical attitude or an unethical monological attitude toward receivers.

How might a dialogical ethical perspective apply to intimate interpersonal communication situations such as between friends, family members, lovers, and spouses? Or consider some of the popular interactive media such as e-mail, chat rooms, blogs, cell phone text messaging, and Microsoft Xbox. For example, blogs (short for weblogs) facilitate extensive participation between blogger and users. One 2005 estimate indicated that 8 million American adults have created their own blogs, almost 32 million indicate they read blogs, and over 14 million say they have responded to a blog. Blog activity has been compared to a conversation or a seminar (Primer, 2005, pp. 15–16). How might we apply ethical standards rooted in a dialogical perspective to evaluate communication via blogs or social network media such as Facebook, Twitter, or Formspring (Box 2.2)?

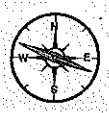
With knowledge of the preceding ethical perspectives (human nature, political, situational, legal, dialogical), we can confront a variety of difficult issues relevant to ethical problems in persuasion. As receivers constantly bombarded with verbal and nonverbal persuasive messages, we continually face resolution of one or another of these fundamental issues. To further help us grapple with such issues, we next consider some traditional advice on ethics which most of us have heard at one time or another—The Golden Rule.

THE GOLDEN RULE AND THE PLATINUM RULE

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Most of us probably are familiar with this statement, which we have come to know as **The Golden Rule**. Persons familiar with the Christian religious tradition may think the Golden Rule is unique to that religion. In the New Testament we find: "And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise" (Luke 6:31; also see Matthew 7:12). However, some version of the Golden Rule is found in the sacred literature of the major world religions, including Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, and Jainism. For example, in Judaism: "What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow men." In Islam: "No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself." In Buddhism: "Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful" (Kane, 1994, p. 34; Samovar, Porter, & Stefani, 1998, p. 269).

One interpretation of the Golden Rule is that we should only do *specific actions* to others if we would allow them to do the same specific actions to us. Another interpretation would not require mutually specific actions but would require that the *ethical principles and standards* that we follow in relating to others are the same ethical principles we would expect others to follow in relating to us (Singer, 1963). Versions of the Golden Rule have been advocated not only by the major world religions but also by non-religious philosophers.

BOX 2.2 Dialogue and Social Network Media



The question-and-answer format of Formspring, they say, builds on our "curiosity about one another" to facilitate "engaging, authentic conversations between our community members." Go to the Formspring website (see Weblink 2.6) and click first on "Community Rules" and then click on "Safety Tips." Read both of these sections carefully. In what ways might the rules and advice in them work over time to build a kind of dialogic communication between users? Now consider the fact that both posers of questions and responders to questions can choose to remain anonymous. How might that fact help or hinder dialogic communication?

Thus a contemporary philosopher, Marcus Singer (1967), concludes: "The nearly universal acceptance of the Golden Rule and its promulgation by persons of considerable intelligence, though otherwise divergent outlooks, would therefore seem to provide some evidence for the claim that it is a fundamental ethical truth."

However, in the context of ethnic and religious diversity and of intercultural and multicultural communication, Milton Bennett argues that the Golden Rule best applies *within* a culture or group that has wide agreement on fundamental values, goals, institutions, and customs. In other words, the Golden Rule assumes that other people want to be treated in the same way we do. But this assumption is not automatically applicable in diverse intercultural and multicultural communication. Too often in such situations we may focus primarily or solely on our own values or preferences to the exclusion or minimization of values and preferences of others that differ from ours. As an alternative (or perhaps supplement) to the Golden Rule, Bennett (1979) offers **The Platinum Rule**: "Do unto others as they themselves would have done unto them."

Certainly the Platinum Rule forces us to take into serious account the values and preferences of others, especially others unlike us, perhaps through empathy for or imagining of their experiences and worldviews. But we need to be careful that we do not interpret the Platinum Rule as requiring us automatically and unquestioningly to do what others want us to do. In making our final decision about what and how to persuade, even on social network media, we should carefully weigh the ethical guidance embodied in both the Golden Rule and the Platinum Rule. Then we should decide which takes precedence in our particular situation.

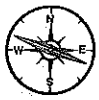
LYING AND DECEPTION

Is it ever ethical to **lie** or be **deceptive**? To this question some people would respond with a resounding no, never! Others would respond with less certainty and recognize the possible complexity of the question. Some would say it depends on the *definition* of lie or deception. Are lying and deception synonymous or is deception a broader concept than lying? Some would say it depends on the *intention or motive* of the liar. Is the motive self-serving for the liar or is the liar's intent to serve a more noble goal or acknowledged good? Some would say it depends on the *circumstances or context* of the lie. Does a unique situation justify a lie that usually would be condemned as unethical? And some would say that the degree of good or bad *consequences* of the lie should justify or condemn the lie. The short-term and long-term consequences should be judged not primarily by the liar but by those lied to and/or impartial observers. For example, if we are telling a "little white lie" to spare the feelings of a friend who is emotionally unstable, that lie might not be defined as a "real lie" or might be viewed as justified by intent and circumstances.

Bear in mind that lies and deception may occur in a wide variety of persuasive types, techniques, and formats such as oral or written statements, images, gesture and facial expression, omission of information, silence, and implication and suggestion. Note also that perceptions of lying and deception often are culture-bound and punishments for them may vary between cultures and between cocultures within a larger culture. A statement or image that one culture views as a lie or deception may not be defined the same way in another culture. Also of importance is the difference between intent/motivation and a lie being *intentional* rather than accidental or out of ignorance or incompetence. Often a lie or deception that is not presented knowingly or consciously may be viewed as less blameworthy than one presented intentionally.

A helpful source on some of the issues discussed above is *Lying and Deception in Human Interaction* by communication scholar Mark Knapp (2008, pp. 3–18, 41–46). Knapp offers pragmatic advice for anyone contemplating presenting a lie. Assume your lie will be discovered sooner or later. The potential liar should consider the following questions: "What is the worst thing that is likely to happen if your lie is discovered—to you and to others? Are you willing to live with the consequences? Will you admit and be accountable for your lie? How will you defend it?" (p. 58).

BOX 2.3 Casino Deception?



In gambling casinos you will find row after row of five or seven slot machines in separate clusters, each designated as penny, two-cent, nickel, dime, quarter, fifty-cent, or one-dollar machines. On occasion there will be a row of five machines with the two on each end being one-cent machines and the middle one being a one-dollar machine. This arrangement occurs at several places in the casino.

There is no lying here since each machine accurately states its monetary designation. But what about nonverbal deception? Who ordered the placement of these five slots in this particular order? What is the intent of this placement? What are several arguments you could use to conclude that intentional deception is involved and that this particular type of placement is unethical?

For our purposes in this chapter we describe **lying** as the intentional presentation in verbal and/or nonverbal form of a claim as true that we know to be false. **Deception** is broader and includes any intentional behavior that misleads, misinforms, or misdirects. Deception is the broader category that includes lying. All lies are deceptive but not all deception is through lies (Box 2.3).

Some of the views of philosopher Sissla Bok (1979) provide insights concerning the nature, functions, and evaluation of lies. She does see deception as a broader category that includes lies. In her book, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*, she evaluates lying in varied contexts: white lies; lies in a crisis for the public good; lying to liars and enemies; lying to protect confidentiality; lying for the welfare of others; lies in social science research on humans; and lying to the sick and dying. Among the excuses people use to justify a lie or deception are: avoiding harm to ourselves or others; producing benefits for others; promoting fairness and justice; and protecting the truth by counteracting another lie, by furthering a more important truth, or by preserving the confidence of others in our truthfulness (pp. 78–94). Often people attempt to justify their lies and deceptions by saying they promote some higher good. The acknowledged good end served, they contend, justifies use of ethically questionable means.

Bok focuses on the importance of telling the truth (as we know it) and avoiding lies whenever possible. Her basic assumption is that trust in some degree of truthfulness is a "*foundation* of relations among human beings; when that trust shatters or wears away, institutions collapse.... *Whatever* matters to human beings, trust is the atmosphere in which it thrives." Bok also assumes that there always is a **negative presumption against lying**. She argues that lying always carries an "initial negative weight," that "truthful statements are preferable to lies in the absence of special considerations," and that "lying requires explanation, whereas truth ordinarily does not" (pp. 32–33).

Lies, says Bok, increase the power of the liar and weaken the power of persons deceived by altering those persons' choices in significant ways. First, the lie may obscure or hide some goal the deceived persons sought. Second, the lie may obscure or eliminate relevant alternatives that should be considered. Third, the lie may misinform concerning benefits and costs of probable consequences. And fourth, lies may falsify the level of confidence or certainty that deceived persons should have about the choice.

There also are potential negative consequences for the liar, whether, for example, the liar be an individual, a commercial ad agency team, or political communication advisor to a candidate. First, resorting to lies may weaken the liar's sense of self as an ethical person. Second, additional lies or deceptions may be needed to preserve the initial lie. Third, lying may increase the temptation to use lies or deception on other topics in the future (p. 55). Fourth and finally, we can add, if caught the lie or deception may damage the reputation or credibility of the liar whether the liar is an individual, group, or institution.

Deception and lies often are associated with common perceptions of propaganda and a demagogue. We turn now to a more detailed examination of ethical issues in propaganda and demagoguery.

ETHICS, PROPAGANDA, AND THE DEMAGOGUE

Is **propaganda** unethical? The answer depends upon how we define propaganda. A simplistic answer, sometimes resorted to in the heat of clash of opposing viewpoints, is to claim that my communication is persuasion but my opponent's/enemy's is propaganda.

Recall the definition (key characteristics) described in chapter 1. (1) Propaganda is ideological—it promotes one and only one way to believe. (2) It employs various mass media to spread its belief system to ever larger masses of fanatical "true believers." (3) It conceals one or more of the message source, the true goal of the source, the other sides of the issue, the persuasive techniques being used, and the actual consequences of putting the belief system in action. (4) It aims at mass uniformity of belief and behavior. (5) It usually circumvents the reasoning process and relies heavily on irrelevant emotional appeals and hatred of stereotyped opponents. Thus the definition used in this book views propaganda as an unethical persuasion process (also see Black, 2009, pp. 143–144).

In his book, *The Idea of Propaganda*, scholar of philosophy and communication Stanley Cunningham (2002, pp. 176–178) argues that propaganda is "an inherently unethical social phenomenon" because it undermines the significant values of truth and truthfulness, reasoning, and knowledge; because it sidesteps voluntary choice and human agency; and because it "exploits and reinforces society's moral weakness." Because propaganda violates the normal communication expectations (implied ethical contracts) of trust, truthfulness, and understanding, it is best characterized as "counterfeit or pseudocommunication." He also describes the various "deep-structured constituents and enabling conditions" that mark propaganda.

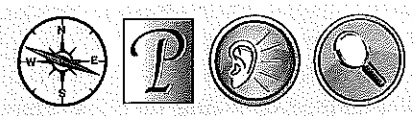
Propaganda, contends Cunningham, is constituted by a "complex array" of deficiencies or shortcomings that undermine justified knowledge. We paraphrase and summarize those characteristics here. Propaganda plays on complexity and stimulates confusion; exploits expectations; poses as valid information and accepted knowledge; constructs belief systems of tenacious convictions that defy questioning; offers false or artificial assurances and certainties; distorts perceptions; disregards truth and truthfulness as values necessary for accurate knowledge and understanding; subverts "rationality, reasoning, and a healthy respect for rigor, evidence, and procedural safeguards"; promotes ignorance and passive acceptance of unexamined beliefs; and uses truths and information as mere instruments rather than as ethical ideals in themselves.

Today the label **demagogue** typically is used to render a negative ethical judgment of a persuader. Too often, however, the label remains only vaguely defined; the criteria being used to evaluate a person as a demagogue are unspecified (Box 2.4).

You now are invited to consider the following five characteristics (taken together) as possible appropriate guides to determining to what degree a persuader warrants the label demagogue (Johannesen, Valde, & Whedbee, 2008, pp. 114–115).

1. A demagogue wields popular or mass leadership over an extensive number of people.

BOX 2.4 Who Is a Demagogue?



Consider the following hypothetical description of a politician: He is the perfect example of a demagogue, combining true-believer certainty, raw pursuit of power, blue-collar populism, chameleon-like adaptability, and blunt, sometimes crude, persuasive appeals (adapted from Lesher, 1972). Are each of the characteristics listed truly appropriate criteria for judging a demagogue? Why or why not? Are there any appropriate criteria omitted? Given the criteria listed, would you label this politician as a demagogue?

2. A demagogue exerts primary influence through the medium of the spoken word—whether through direct public speaking to an audience or through speaking via radio, television, or on the Internet.
3. A demagogue relies heavily on propaganda defined in the negative sense of intentional use of suggestion, scapegoating, irrelevant emotional appeals, and pseudo-proof in order to bypass human rational decision-making processes.
4. A demagogue capitalizes on the availability of a major current social cause or problem.
5. A demagogue is hypocritical. The social cause serves as a mask or persuasive leverage point while the actual primary motive is selfish interest and personal gain.

Several cautions are in order when applying these guidelines. A persuader may reflect each of these characteristics to a greater or lesser degree and only in certain circumstances. A key determination would be whether the alleged demagogue shows a high degree of all the characteristics most of the time. A persuader might fulfill only several of these criteria (such as items 1, 2, and 4) and yet not be called a demagogue. Characteristics 3 and 5 seem to be central to a conception of a demagogue. How easily and accurately can we determine a persuader's actual motives? Should we limit the label "demagogue" solely to the political arena, or could it apply to religious figures, radio/TV talk show hosts such as Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck, or Internet bloggers such as Ariana Huffington? Go online and Google these persons' names to see if you can locate sources that discuss them as demagogues.

ETHICAL STANDARDS FOR POLITICAL PERSUASION

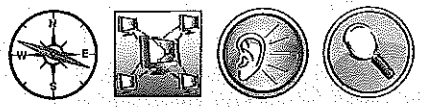
Directly and indirectly, we are daily exposed to political persuasion in varied forms. For example, the president appeals on national television for public support of a military campaign. A senator argues in Congress against ratification of a treaty. A government bureaucrat announces a new regulation and presents reasons to justify it. A federal official contends that information requested by a citizen action group cannot be revealed for national security reasons. A national, state, or local politician campaigns for election. A citizen protests a proposed property tax rate increase at a city council meeting. What ethical criteria should we apply to judge the many kinds of political persuasion?

During the latter half of the twentieth century, traditional American textbook discussions of the ethics of persuasion, rhetoric, and argument often included lists of standards for evaluating the ethicality of an instance of persuasion. Such criteria often are rooted, implicitly if not explicitly, in what we previously described as a political perspective for judging the ethics of persuasion. The criteria usually stem from a commitment to values and procedures deemed essential to the health and growth of our system of representative democracy.

Of all the ethical criteria for varied types and contexts of persuasion described in this chapter, the following 11 are the most generally applicable for you to use as a persuader and persuadee. Do not look on these standards as limited only to political persuasion. They can apply to a wide variety of persuasive efforts in which you engage or to which you are exposed such as Internet blogs and SNM. Consider adopting (and modifying) these standards as your own *starting point commitment* to ethical persuasion (also see Sellers, 2004; Baker & Martinson, 2001).

What follows is my synthesis and adaptation of a number of traditional lists of ethical criteria for persuasion (Johannesen, Valde, & Whedbee, 2008, pp. 28–29). Within the context of our own society, the following criteria are not necessarily the only or best ones possible; they are suggested as general guidelines rather than inflexible rules, and they may stimulate discussion on the complexity of judging the ethics of persuasion. Consider, for example, under what circumstances there might be justifiable exceptions to some of these criteria. Also bear in mind that one difficulty in applying

BOX 2.5 Checking the Facts



On the FactCheck.org website go to the article "Toss-Up: Missouri Mudslinging" (see Weblink 2.7). This 2010 Missouri U.S. Senate race focused on claims by both candidates that their opponent had engaged in unethical behavior. FactCheck concluded that both candidates distorted facts in their TV ads. Read the complete analysis by FactCheck. How adequate are distinctions made between clear-cut lies versus other types of deception? Which of the 11 ethical criteria for political persuasion suggested in this chapter might apply to particular ads?

these criteria in concrete situations stems from differing standards and meanings people may have for such terms as *distort, falsify, rational, reasonable, conceal, misrepresent, irrelevant,* and *deceive.*

1. Do not use false, fabricated, misrepresented, distorted, or irrelevant evidence to support arguments or claims.
2. Do not intentionally use specious, unsupported, or illogical reasoning.
3. Do not represent yourself as informed or as an "expert" on a subject when you are not.
4. Do not use irrelevant appeals to divert attention or scrutiny from the issue at hand. Among the appeals that commonly serve such a purpose are smear attacks on an opponent's character, appeals to hatred and bigotry, innuendo, and emotionally loaded terms that cause intense but unreflective positive or negative reactions.
5. Do not ask your audience to link your idea or proposal to emotion-laden values, motives, or goals to which it actually is not related.
6. Do not deceive your audience by concealing your real purpose or self-interest, the group you represent, or your position as an advocate of a viewpoint.
7. Do not distort, hide, or misrepresent the number, scope, intensity, or undesirable features of consequences or effects.
8. Do not use emotional appeals that lack a supporting basis of evidence or reasoning or that would not be accepted if the audience had time and opportunity to examine the subject themselves.
9. Do not oversimplify complex situations into simplistic two-valued, either/or, polar views, or choices.
10. Do not pretend certainty where tentativeness and degrees of probability would be more accurate.
11. Do not advocate something in which you do not believe yourself.

FactCheck.org is a non-partisan project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. It evaluates the factual accuracy of public statements by political candidates, public officials, and news reports. In evaluating the advertisements of various state and national 2010 political campaigns, they found numerous "twisted claims and distortions of reality" and some "pure fabrication" (Box 2.5).

ETHICAL STANDARDS FOR COMMERCIAL ADVERTISING

Consumers, academics, and advertisers themselves clearly do not agree on any one set of ethical standards as appropriate for assessing commercial advertising. Here we will simply survey some of the widely varied criteria that have been suggested. Among them you may find guidelines that will aid your own assessments.

Sometimes advertisers adopt what we previously called legal perspectives, in which ethicality

is equated with legality. However, advertising executive Harold Williams (1974) observed:

> What is legal and what is ethical are not synonymous, and neither are what is legal and what is honest. We tend to resort to legality often as our guideline. This is in effect what happens often when we turn to the lawyers for confirmation that a course of action is an appropriate one.
>
> We must recognize that we are getting a legal opinion, but not necessarily an ethical or moral one. The public, the public advocates, and many of the legislative and administrative authorities recognize it even if we do not (pp. 285–288).

Typically, commercial advertising has been viewed as persuasion that argues a case or demonstrates a claim concerning the actual nature or merits of a product. This view is reflected in the formal codes of ethics of professional advertising associations, such as the American Advertising Federation. Many of the traditional ethical standards for truthfulness and rationality are applicable to such attempts at arguing the quality of a product. For instance, are the evidence and the reasoning supporting the claim clear, accurate, relevant, and sufficient in quantity? Are the emotional and motivational appeals directly relevant to the product (Box 2.6)?

The American Association of Advertising Agencies' code of ethics was revised in 1990. As you read the following standards, consider their level of adequacy, the degree to which they are relevant and appropriate today, the extent to which they are being followed by advertisers, and how they reflect truthfulness and rationality criteria. Association members agree to avoid intentionally producing advertising that contains the following:

- false or misleading statements or exaggerations, visual or verbal
- testimonials that do not reflect the real choices of the individuals involved
- price claims that are misleading
- claims that are insufficiently supported or that distort the true meaning or practicable application of statements made by professional or scientific authority
- statements, suggestions, or pictures offensive to public decency or to minority segments of the population.

What if ethical standards of truthfulness and rationality are irrelevant to most commercial advertising? What if the primary purpose of most ads is not to prove a claim? Then the ethical standards we apply may stem from whatever alternative view of the nature and purpose of advertising we do hold. Some advertisements function primarily to capture and sustain consumer attention, to announce a product, or to create consumer awareness of the name of a product. Many advertisements aim primarily at stimulating in consumers a positive or feel-good attitude about the product through use of metaphor, humor, fantasy, and fiction (Spence & Van Heekeren, 2005, pp. 41–53). What ethical criteria are most appropriate for such attention-getting or feel-good ads?

What ethical evaluation of effects and consequences would you make of an advertisement for

BOX 2.6 The Story of Stuff Project

The mission of *The Story of Stuff Project* is to build a social movement to transform current wasteful and polluting systems of production and consumption into ones that foster "ecological sustainability and social wellbeing." Go to *The Story of Stuff* website and view the eight minute video titled "The Story of Bottled Water" (see Weblink 2.8). This video is an argument against unethical ads and practices of the bottled water industry. Why, or why not, were you persuaded about the industry? What industry ads were ethically questionable and why? Also explain whether the project itself used claims or techniques that were ethically questionable.

Fetish perfume in *Seventeen*, a magazine whose readers include several million young teenage girls? The ad shows an attractive female teenager looking seductively at the readers. The written portion of the ad says, "Apply generously to your neck so he can smell the scent as you shake your head 'no.'" Consider that this ad exists in a larger cultural context in which acquaintance rape is a societal problem, women and girls are clearly urged to say "No!" to unwanted sexual advances, and men and boys too often still believe that "no" really means "yes."

What harmful individual and societal consequences may stem from ads that negatively stereotype persons or groups on the basis of age (old and confused), sex (women as sex objects), or culture (backward)? Our frequent exposure to such ads may indeed influence the way we perceive and treat such stereotyped persons and the way the stereotyped persons view themselves and their own abilities (Spence & Van Heekeren, 2005, pp. 54–69). "Therefore, insofar as stereotyping in advertising degrades people as persons and harms their personal dignity by degrading the societal group to which they belong, stereotyping violates people's rights to freedom and well-being and hence is unethical" (p. 68).

Commercial advertisements sometimes can be criticized for containing ambiguous or vague elements. But concern about vagueness and ambiguity in persuasion is not limited to commercial advertising. Now we examine the more general ethical implications of ambiguity and vagueness.

THE ETHICS OF INTENTIONAL AMBIGUITY AND VAGUENESS

"Language that is of doubtful or uncertain meaning" might be a typical definition of ambiguous language. **Ambiguous** language is open to two or more legitimate interpretations. **Vague** language lacks definiteness, explicitness, or preciseness of meaning. Clear communication of intended meaning usually is one major aim of the ethical communicator, whether that person seeks to enhance receivers' understanding or to influence beliefs, attitudes, or actions. Textbooks on oral and written communication typically warn against ambiguity and vagueness; often, they take the position that intentional ambiguity is an unethical communication tactic. For example, later in this book, ambiguity is discussed as a functional device of style, as a stylistic technique that is often successful while ethically questionable.

Most people agree that intentional ambiguity is unethical in situations in which accurate instruction or transmission of precise information is the acknowledged purpose. Even in most so-called persuasive communication situations, intentional ambiguity is ethically suspect. However, in some situations, communicators may believe that the intentional creation of ambiguity or vagueness is necessary, accepted, expected as normal, and even ethically justified. Such might be the case, for example, in religious discourse, in some advertising, in labor-management bargaining, in political campaigning, or in international diplomatic negotiations.

We can itemize a number of specific purposes for which communicators might believe that intentional ambiguity is ethically justified: (1) to heighten receiver attention through puzzlement, (2) to allow flexibility in interpretation of legal concepts, (3) to allow for precise understanding and agreement on the primary issue by using ambiguity on secondary issues, (4) to promote maximum receiver psychological participation in the communication transaction by letting receivers create their own relevant meanings, and (5) to promote maximum latitude for revision of a position in later dealings with opponents or with constituents by avoiding being locked into a single absolute stance.

In political communication, whether from campaigners or government officials, several circumstances might justify intentional ambiguity. First, a president or presidential candidate often communicates to multiple audiences through a single message via a mass medium such as television or radio. Different parts of the message may appeal to specific audiences, and intentional ambiguity in

BOX 2.7 Ambiguity and Confusion

Recall from chapter 1 Rank's intensify/downplay model for critically analyzing persuasion. In general he does not attach ethical judgments to the tactics of repetition, association, composition, omission, diversion, and confusion. We could infer that in a specific situation concrete examples of each tactic might be ethical, ethically questionable, or obviously unethical. But think more deeply about the tactic of confusion. Might it be the case that intentional promotion of confusion *always* is ethically questionable or obviously unethical? What are some examples of persuaders promoting confusion in the minds of receivers that you would judge to be unethical? What is your justification? Try to identify some examples of intentional promotion of confusion that you would consider to be *wholly ethical.* Finally, what is the relationship between promotion of confusion and promotion of ambiguity/vagueness as discussed in this section?

some message elements avoids offending any of the audiences. Second, as political scientist Lewis Froman (1966) observed, a candidate "cannot take stands on specific issues because he doesn't know what the specific choices will be until he is faced with the necessity for concrete decision. Also, specific commitments would be too binding in a political process that depends upon negotiation and compromise" (p. 9). Third, groups of voters increasingly make decisions about whether to support or oppose a candidate on the basis of that candidate's stand on a single issue of paramount importance to those groups. The candidate's position on a variety of other public issues is often ignored or dismissed. "Single-issue politics" is the phrase frequently used to characterize this trend. A candidate may be intentionally ambiguous on one emotion-packed issue in order to get a fair hearing for his or her stands on many other issues (Box 2.7).

During the 2004 presidential campaign, George W. Bush frequently charged his opponent, John Kerry, with "flip-flopping" on significant issues. That is, Bush claimed that Kerry often changed his position on issues and thus was inconsistent or ambiguous. Is it automatically unethical for a politician to change her or his position on an issue? Why or why not?

In some advertising, intentional ambiguity seems to be understood as such by consumers and even accepted by them. In your opinion, what might be some ethical issues in the TV ad for a popular beer, in which Sergio Garcia, a famous professional golfer, acts as a kind of secret agent? He sneaks into a plush party to meet a sultry, sexy-looking date.

SHE: "What took you so long?"
HE: "Tough drive."
HE: "How's your game?"
SHE (IN A SEXY VOICE): "Oh, there's nothing like a good up and down."

THE ETHICS OF MORAL EXCLUSION

Moral exclusion, according to Susan Opotow (1990), "occurs when individuals or groups are perceived as outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply. Those who are morally excluded are perceived as nonentities, expendable, or undeserving; consequently, harming them appears acceptable, appropriate, or just." Persons morally excluded are denied their rights, dignity, and autonomy. Opotow isolates for analysis and discussion over two dozen symptoms or manifestations of moral exclusion. For our purposes, a noteworthy fact is that many of them directly involve communication. Although all the symptoms she presents are significant for a full understanding of the mind-set of individuals engaged in moral exclusion, the following clearly involve persuasion:

- showing the superiority of oneself or one's group by making unflattering comparisons to other individuals or groups

- denigrating and disparaging others by characterizing them as lower life forms (vermin) or as inferior beings (barbarians, aliens)
- denying that others possess humanity, dignity, or sensitivity, or have a right to compassion
- redefining as an increasingly larger category that of "legitimate" victims
- placing the blame for any harm on the victim
- justifying harmful acts by claiming that the morally condemnable acts committed by "the enemy" are significantly worse
- misrepresenting cruelty and harm by masking, sanitizing, and conferring respectability on them through the use of neutral, positive, technical, or euphemistic terms to describe them
- justifying harmful behavior by claiming that it is widely accepted (everyone is doing it) or that it was isolated and uncharacteristic (it happened just this once)

An example may clarify how language choices function to achieve moral exclusion. The category of "vermin" includes parasitic insects such as fleas, lice, mosquitoes, bedbugs, and ticks that can infest human bodies. In Nazi Germany, Adolf Hitler's speeches and writings often referred to Jews as a type of parasite infesting the pure Aryan race (non-Jewish Caucasians or people of Nordic heritage) or as a type of disease attacking the German national body. The depiction of Jews as parasites or a disease served to place them outside the moral boundary where ethical standards apply to human treatment of other humans. Jews were classified or categorized as nonhumans. As parasites, they had to be exterminated; as a cancerous disease, they had to be cut out of the national body.

Another example of moral exclusion is the genocide (attempted extermination of an entire ethnic group) that occurred in the African nation of Rwanda in 1994. In about 100 days, some 800,000 people were slaughtered, most by being hacked to death with machetes. The ethnic Hutus in power organized soldiers and ordinary citizens to murder ethnic Tutsis (men, women, and children), many of whom had been friends and neighbors. While there are multiple causes or influences that led to the massacre, clearly the language of moral exclusion was a contributing factor. A lengthy government propaganda campaign using radio programs fostered in the minds of the Hutus a view of Tutsis as less than human, as prey "for hunting expeditions," and as "cockroaches" to be squashed. For horrifying yet routine examples of this process, we urge you to read Jean Hatzfeld, *Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak* (2005). To experience the hate-filled atmosphere at that time, view the fact-based films *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) and *Beyond the Gates* (2005).

Michael Ramirez is a conservative political cartoonist. He has received two Pulitzer Prizes (1994 and 2008) for his editorial cartoons. On June 25, 2007 he published an editorial cartoon in the *Investor's Business Daily* that prompts further discussion of the moral exclusion process (Figure 2.4).

Note that while the word *Iran* is very clear on the sewer cover the word *extremism* is much less clear. Also note that there are masses of cockroaches streaming out of the sewer to infest other mid-east countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. How easy would it be for a viewer of this image to conclude that *all* Iranians (not just extremists) are cockroaches (less than human vermin)? What might be the normal solution for the problem of cockroaches spewing from their breeding ground in Iran? Drop a bug-bomb down the sewer? Or, by implication, drop a nuclear bomb on Iran? In judging the ethics of this cartoon, how much does it matter whether Ramirez *intended* the above interpretation? A collection of a large body of his editorial cartoons, including this one and those that won him the Pulitzer Prizes, is Michael Ramirez, *Everyone Has The **Right** To My Opinion* (2008). For a wide-ranging analysis of examples of moral exclusion see Erin Steuter and Deborah Wills, *At War With Metaphor* (2008).

Even headlines we encounter daily in newspapers or magazines may reflect (perhaps unconsciously) the process of moral exclusion. Carefully consider the headline discussed in Box 2.8.

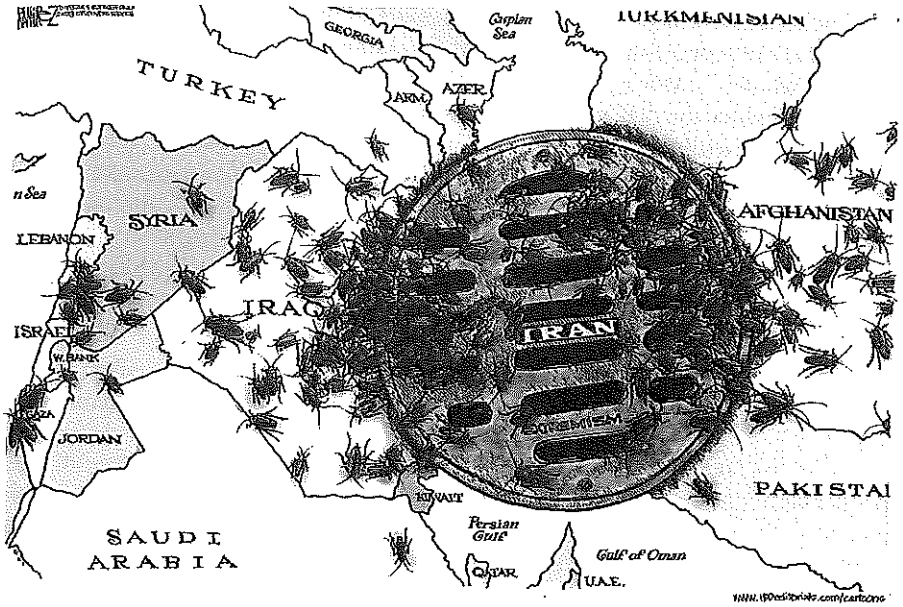
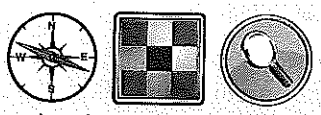


FIGURE 2.4 Ramirez editorial cartoon and moral exclusion.

SOURCE: By permission of Michael Ramirez and Creators Syndicate, Inc.

BOX 2.8 Moral Exclusion in a Headline



The headline "An Eskimo Encounters Civilization—and Mankind" appeared in the Tempo section of the *Chicago Tribune* (May 29, 2000). Can you identify two ways in which the words in the headline reflect a process of moral exclusion? How do these words place people outside the categories where human ethics normally apply? Hate speech, as discussed earlier in this chapter, and racist/sexist language, examined in the next section, also illustrate the process of moral exclusion. In what ways does hate speech embody the moral exclusion process?

The Ethics of Racist/Sexist Language

In *The Language of Oppression*, communication scholar Haig Bosmajian (1983) demonstrated how names, labels, definitions, and stereotypes traditionally have been used to degrade, dehumanize, and suppress Jews, Blacks, Native Americans, and women. Bosmajian's goal was to expose the "decadence in our language, the inhumane uses of language" that have been used "to justify the unjustifiable, to make palatable the unpalatable, to make reasonable the unreasonable, to make decent the indecent." Bosmajian reminded us: "Our identities, who and what we are, how others see us, are greatly affected by the names we are called and the words with which we are labeled. The names, labels, and phrases employed to 'identify' a people may in the end determine their survival" (pp. 5, 9).

"Every language reflects the prejudices of the society in which it evolved. Since English, through most of its history, evolved in a white, Anglo-Saxon, patriarchal

society, no one should be surprised that its vocabulary and grammar frequently reflect attitudes that exclude or demean minorities and women" (Miller & Swift, 1981, pp. 2–3). Such is the fundamental position of Casey Miller and Kate Swift, authors of *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing*. Conventional English usage, they argued, "often obscures the actions, the contributions, and sometimes the very presence of women" (p. 8). Because such language usage is misleading and inaccurate, it has ethical implications. "In this respect, continuing to use English in ways that have become misleading is no different from misusing data, whether the misuse is inadvertent or planned" (p. 8).

To what degree is the use of **racist/sexist language** unethical, and by what standards? At the least, racist/sexist terms place people in artificial and irrelevant categories. At worst, such terms intentionally demean and put down other people by embodying unfair negative value judgments of their traits, capacities, and accomplishments. What are the ethical implications, for instance, of calling a Jewish person a "kike," a Black person a "nigger" or "boy," an Italian person a "wop," an Asian person a "gook" or "slant-eye," or a thirty-year-old woman a "girl" or "chick"? Here is one possible answer:

> In the war in Southeast Asia, our military fostered a linguistic environment in which the Vietnamese people were called such names as slope, dink, slant, gook, and zip; those names made it much easier to despise, to fear, to kill them. When we call women in our own society by the names of gash, slut, dyke, bitch, or girl, we—men and women alike—have put ourselves in a position to demean and abuse them (Bailey, 1984, pp. 42–43).

From a political perspective, we might value access to the relevant and accurate information needed to make reasonable decisions on public issues. Racist/sexist language, however, by reinforcing stereotypes, conveys inaccurate depictions of people, fails to take serious account of them, or even makes them invisible for purposes of such decisions. Such language denies us access to necessary accurate information and thus is ethically suspect. From a human nature perspective, it is also ethically suspect because it dehumanizes individuals and groups by undermining and circumventing their uniquely human capacity for rational thought or for using symbols. From a dialogical perspective, racist/sexist language is ethically suspect because it reflects a superior, exploitative, inhumane attitude toward others, thus denying equal opportunity for self-fulfillment for some people.

A Feminist View on Persuasion

Feminism is not a concept with a single, universally accepted definition. For our purposes, elements of definitions provided by Barbara Bate (1992) and Julia Wood (1994) are helpful. **Feminism** holds that both women and men are complete and important human beings and that societal barriers (typically constructed through language processes) have prevented women from being perceived and treated as of equal worth to men. Feminism implies a commitment to equality and respect for life. It rejects oppression and domination as undesirable values and accepts that difference need not be equated with inferiority or undesirability.

Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin (1995) develop an "invitational rhetoric" rooted in the feminist assumptions that (1) relationships of equality are usually more desirable than ones of domination and elitism, (2) every human being has value because she or he is unique and is an integral part of the pattern of the universe, and (3) individuals have a right to self-determination concerning the conditions of their lives (they are expert about their lives).

Invitational rhetoric, say Foss and Griffin, invites "the audience to enter the rhetor's world and to see it as the rhetor does." The invitational rhetor "does not judge or denigrate others' perspectives but is open to and tries to appreciate and validate those perspectives, even if they differ dramatically from the rhetor's own." The goal is to establish a "nonhierarchical, nonjudgmental, non-adversarial framework" for the interaction

and to develop a "relationship of equality, respect, and appreciation" with the audience. Invitational rhetors make no assumption that their "experiences or perspectives are superior to those of audience members and refuse to impose their perspectives on them." Although change is not the intent of invitational rhetoric, it might be a result. Change can occur in the "audience or rhetor or both as a result of new understandings and insights gained in the exchange of ideas."

In the process of invitational rhetoric, Foss and Griffin contend, the rhetor offers perspectives without advocating their support or seeking their acceptance. These individual perspectives are expressed "as carefully, completely, and passionately as possible" to invite their full consideration. In offering perspectives, "rhetors tell what they currently know or understand; they present their vision of the world and how it works for them." They also "communicate a willingness to call into question the beliefs they consider most inviolate and to relax a grip on these beliefs." Further, they strive to create the conditions of safety, value, and freedom in interactions with audience members. Safety implies "the creation of a feeling of security and freedom from danger for the audience," so that participants do not "fear rebuttal of or retribution for their most fundamental beliefs." Value involves acknowledging the intrinsic worth of audience members as human beings. In interaction, attitudes that are "distancing, depersonalizing, or paternalistic" are avoided, and "listeners do not interrupt, confront, or insert anything of their own as others tell of their experiences." Freedom includes the power to choose or decide, with no restrictions placed on the interaction. Thus, participants may introduce for consideration any and all matters; "no subject matter is off limits, and all presuppositions can be challenged." Finally, in invitational rhetoric, the "rhetor's ideas are not privileged over those of the audience." (Also see Gorsevski, 2004, pp. 75, 164.)

In concluding their explication of an invitational rhetoric, Foss and Griffin suggest that this rhetoric requires "a new scheme of ethics to fit interactional goals other than inducement of others to adherence to the rhetor's own beliefs." What might be some appropriate ethical guidelines for an invitational rhetoric? What ethical standards seem already to be implied by the dimensions or constituents of such a rhetoric? For example, invitational rhetoric respects the value and freedom of the others to whom the persuasion is addressed and in doing so avoids moral exclusion. Also such rhetoric reflects a type of dialogic communication as discussed earlier in this chapter.

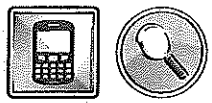
A few scholars with a feminist viewpoint explore ethical issues concerning the Internet and cyberspace (e.g., Adam, 2005). Our next topic examines general issues of Internet ethics from several ethical viewpoints.

ETHICAL ISSUES IN CYBERSPACE

What ethical standards should apply to communication in cyberspace—in the realm of the Internet, e-mail, blogs, chat rooms and social network media (Box 2.9)? We can get guidance and suggestions from several sources (e.g., Berkman & Shumway, 2003; Cavalier, 2005; Hamelink, 2000; Johnson, 2001; Wolf, 2003). Some of the "Ten Commandments of Computer Ethics" formulated by the Computer Ethics Institute are particularly relevant. For example, "thou shalt not: use a computer to harm other people; interfere with other people's computer work; snoop around in other people's computer files; use a computer to steal; use a computer to bear false witness against others; [or] plagiarize another person's intellectual output" (reprinted in Ermann, Williams, and Shauf, 1997, pp. 313–314).

In *The Weblog Handbook*, Rebecca Blood (2002, pp. 85–87, 114–121, 135–137) contends that "the weblog's greatest strength—its uncensored, unmediated, uncontrolled voice—is also its greatest weakness." Also she laments that there "has been almost no talk about ethics in the weblog universe." Blood thus is aware of the tension between freedom and responsibility in this form of Internet communication. At several points in her book, she suggests principles to highlight ethical responsibilities both for creators of and participants in the various types of blogs: (1) "Publish as fact only that which you believe to be true. If your

BOX 2.9 False Photo on Facebook



Imagine that you and your close friend both have home pages on Facebook. Without your knowledge your friend uses a photograph of you instead of your friend's own photo on her/his home page. After finding out, how would you feel about your friend's action? Because of this action, have you lost trust in your friend? Why? Is your friend's action unethical? Why? Does the use of your photo constitute lying to persons who have access to your friend's home page? Why? In what ways might issues of motive, context, consequences, and intentionality apply to this example?

statement is speculation, say so." (2) "If material exists online, link to it when you reference it. Online readers deserve, as much as possible, access to all of the facts." (3) "Publicly correct any misinformation." If you discover that one of your links was inaccurate or one of your statements was untrue, say so and correct it. (4) "Write each entry as if it could not be changed; add to, but do not rewrite or delete any entry.... Changing or deleting destroys the integrity of the network." (5) Disclose any possible or actual conflict of interest so that audience trust is not undermined. (6) Clearly label biased or questionable sources, otherwise readers will lack necessary information to assess the merits of the source. (7) Respect other people's privacy. It is ethically questionable to repeat without permission someone's instant message, chat-room or real-life conversation, or e-mail. (8) Question someone's facts or arguments but don't personalize your attack by denouncing her or his stupidity or other personal characteristics. (9) Consider carefully the arguments and evidence presented by others and try to represent their positions fairly and accurately.

Advertising and marketing specialists increasingly capitalize on the interactive capacities of the Internet and of interactive television to create a two-way "conversation" between product and consumer. On the Internet, Java and Shockwave technologies facilitate interactive ads. Video on demand and personal video recorders (such as TiVo) afford opportunities for interactive television ads. But much of the contact, such as banner ads and pop-ups on the Internet, is not truly a conversation (Spence & Van Heekeren, 2005, pp. 96–107). "One-way unsolicited communications from advertisers to consumers, especially when they are conducted without the consumers' consent, are not 'interactive' and not 'conversations' even if the advertisers mislabel them as such. And insofar as they invade the consumers' privacy they are ethically unjustified" (p. 104).

Let's consider the ethical implications of several terms often used in the context of the Internet. *Cookies* are used by various types of websites to collect information about the browsing behavior of visitors to that site but to track that information without the visitor's knowledge or approval. How we conceptualize such processes influences whether they may have ethical dimensions. Are cookies like a clerk asking for our zip code so a store can do more efficient market analysis or are they an intrusive "stealth" surveillance technique? Are they like cameras in a store to help catch shoplifters or like a camera in our home watching what we do in private? (Adapted from Johnson, 2001, pp. 9–10). *Spam* is a type of promotional e-mail sent to large numbers of users all at the same time but it has not been requested by those e-mail users. On what grounds, and why, might it be considered unethical? Or is spam simply irritating "junk mail" but not considered unethical?

Going viral describes rumors, controversial statements, and provocative photos or videos that are quickly picked up, rapidly spread, and widely diffused through blogs, e-mail, and social network media such as YouTube and Twitter. This rapid virus-like spread often occurs without any consideration of factual accuracy or personal/media ethical responsibility. In analyzing the "Whoppers of Campaign 2010," FactCheck.org notes that the claims they were most frequently asked to verify "don't always come from

the mouths of politicians, or even their TV ads.... The falsehoods circulate widely by e-mail, forwarded by people who don't know or don't care that they are spreading misinformation the way a virus spreads disease" (see Weblink 2.9).

As social network media, Facebook, YouTube, Formspring, and Twitter are not simply neutral conduits of messages. They facilitate intentional efforts to influence or persuade others, not just allow for self-expression. Of course ethical issues arise concerning these vehicles of persuasion. In his book, *Watching YouTube*, media critic Michael Strangelove (2010) observes: "Videos within YouTube are littered with racist, sexist, misogynist, homophobic, anti-Semitic, and obscene hate speech" (pp. 119, 107). And the process of moral exclusion often functions in additional ways. "Comparisons between a politician and Hitler or the devil are common within YouTube" (p. 147).

It could be argued that Twitter, by its very structure, encourages deception and lying in political persuasion. Consider the reasoning of FactCheck.org. "For providing false and misleading information, the 30-second TV spot crafted by a seasoned media consultant is still king. But there's another medium this campaign year that makes the content of a TV ad seem like the Lincoln-Douglas debates. We're talking about Twitter.... It provides its users with 140 characters to make a point—enabling them to oversimplify and exaggerate. In politics this is considered an asset, and both parties have taken to the social networking site" by using "designated party twitterers" to reinforce misperceptions about opponents or make clear-cut lies (see Weblink 2.10). The structure of Formspring allows both posers of questions and responders to questions to choose to be anonymous. This feature may encourage such unethical communication as hate speech and bullying. Two frequent postings on Formspring are "you should kill yourself" and the claim or rumor that one person has hooked up with another person (Eldeib, 2010).

Standards, criteria, and guidelines are central to much of the earlier discussion in this chapter, and shortly we will present a framework of questions that can improve your ethical judgment. But now we discuss the often-neglected role of your own formed ethical character in creating and evaluating persuasion.

ETHICS AND PERSONAL CHARACTER

Ethical persuasion is not simply a series of careful and reflective decisions, instance by instance, to persuade in ethically responsible ways. Deliberate application of ethical rules is sometimes impossible. Pressure for a decision can be so great or a deadline so near that there is insufficient time for careful deliberation. We might be unsure what ethical criteria are relevant or how they apply. The situation might seem so unusual that applicable criteria do not readily come to mind. In such times of crisis or uncertainty, our decisions concerning ethical persuasion stem less from deliberation than from our formed "character." Further, our ethical character influences what terms we use to describe a situation and whether we believe the situation contains ethical implications (Hauerwas, 1977; Johannesen, 1991; Klaidman & Beauchamp, 1987; Lebacqz, 1985).

Consider the nature of **moral character** as described by ethicists Richard DeGeorge and Karen Lebacqz. As human beings develop, according to DeGeorge (1999), they adopt patterns of actions and dispositions to act in certain ways.

> These dispositions, when viewed collectively, are sometimes called *character*. The character of a person is the sum of his or her virtues and vices. A person who habitually tends to act as he morally should has a good character. If he resists strong temptation, he has a strong character. If he habitually acts immorally, he has a morally bad character. If despite good intentions he frequently succumbs to temptation, he has a weak character. Because character is formed by conscious actions, in general people are morally responsible for their characters as well as for their individual actions (p. 123).

Lebacqz (1985) observes:

> ... when we act, we not only do something, we also shape our own character. Our choices about what to do are also choices about whom to be. A single lie does not necessarily make us a liar; but a

> series of lies may. And so each choice about what to do is also a choice about whom to be—or, more accurately, whom to become (p. 83).

In Judeo-Christian or Western cultures, good moral character is usually associated with habitual embodiment of such virtues as courage, temperance, wisdom, justice, fairness, generosity, gentleness, patience, truthfulness, and trustworthiness. Other cultures may praise additional or different virtues that they believe constitute good ethical character. Instilled in us as habitual dispositions to act, these virtues guide the ethics of our communication behavior when careful or clear deliberation is not possible.

The Josephson Institute of Ethics conducted a 2009 survey of almost 7,000 persons ranging in age from teenage to over fifty. This ethical integrity report examined the degree to which attitudes and habits of young people carried over into their adult behavior. Here are some typical findings. Respondents who believed that lying and cheating are a necessary part of success, when compared with those who did not believe this, were: two and one-half times more likely to have deceived their boss on a significant matter during the past year, more than three times as likely to have misrepresented themselves on a resume in the past five years, three times as likely to have misrepresented or omitted important facts during a job interview, and twice as likely to lie in significant personal relationships. Respondents who cheated on high school exams two or more times (compared to those who did not cheat) were: twice as likely to have deceived their boss, more than twice as likely to have lied or mislead on a resume, three times more likely to have misrepresented relevant facts on a job interview, and three times more likely to have filed a false insurance claim. Respondents who believed that lying and cheating were a necessary part of success and respondents who cheated on exams in high school (both compared to those who did not) were much more likely to have made an unauthorized copy of music or video in the past year. Michael Josephson, the founder of the institute, believes the survey demonstrates that "character counts now and in the future and that values and habits formed in school persist" (see Weblink 2.11).

When we evaluate a person's ethical character in light of a specific action or persuasive technique, there are five issues or dimensions that may aid us in reaching a judgment. These issues may apply in varying degrees to a wide variety of persons, such as family, friends, coworkers, business leaders, leaders of volunteer or social organizations, or elected or appointed government officials. That is, these issues apply to anyone in whom we place our trust and whom we assume to have certain responsibilities in their roles. The dimensions aid our critical thinking about character.

First, we consider the *citizen-politician issue.* Should the ethical standards we expect of politicians be the same or higher than those for the average citizen? Why? Second, the *private-public dimension* warrants consideration. Is the behavior that is ethically at issue relevant to the duties or responsibilities the person has in the public realm? Or is the behavior purely a personal and private matter and not appropriate for public examination? Third for consideration is the *past-present dimension.* Should we be most concerned about recent behavior? Or should unethical behavior in the past also be of concern? How far past is past? Should we overlook a "youthful indiscretion" but worry more about unethical behavior of the mature person? Fourth, we must consider the *once-pattern issue.* Should we overlook a one-time unethical behavior ("we all make mistakes") while taking very seriously evidence of a pattern or habit of unethical behavior? What if the one-time mistake was intentional rather than unintentional? Is evidence of a pattern of unethical behavior a sign of a serious character flaw, such as poor judgment or hypocrisy? Fifth, the *dimension of trivial-serious* must be evaluated. Is the unethical behavior trivial and minor or is it serious and significant? Should we make allowances for minor ethical mistakes but not make allowances for major, serious, clearly harmful ethical errors? A careful consideration of these five issues/dimensions may help us reach clearer and more precise judgments about a person's ethical character (even our

own) when that character is in question because of unethical persuasion.

Members of organizations frequently pattern their own communication behavior and ethical standards after those persons in leadership roles for the organization. The ethical or unethical behavior of leaders significantly influences the organization's ethical climate. A reasonable expectation by members would be that leaders should embody the standards presented in the organization's code of ethics. A leader with weak ethical character, however, may not embody those standards.

Consider the Enron Corporation scandal and collapse in the first years of this century. In July 2000, Kenneth Lay, the founder, chairman, CEO of Enron, sent all employees a 65-page code of ethics. Honesty, candor, and fairness were to mark the company's relations with its various stakeholders. Respect and integrity were basic values. Thus, "ruthlessness, callousness, and arrogance" were condemned, and open, honest, and sincere relationships were stressed. Kenneth Lay's signed introduction to the code emphasized that business must be conducted in a "moral and honest manner." He concluded by noting "Enron's reputation finally depends upon its people, you and me." How ironic, then, that in May 2006 Kenneth Lay was convicted in federal court of various charges that involved lying and deception about Enron's profits and debts (for a copy of the code of ethics, see Weblink 2.12).

IMPROVING ETHICAL JUDGMENT

One purpose of this book is to make you a more discerning receiver and consumer of communication by encouraging ethical judgments of communication that are specifically focused and carefully considered. In making judgments about the ethics of your own communication and the communication to which you are exposed, you should make specific rather than vague assessments, and thoughtful rather than reflexive, "gut-level" reactions.

The following framework of questions is offered as a means of making more systematic and firmly grounded judgments of communication ethics. Bear in mind philosopher Stephen Toulmin's (1950) observation that "moral reasoning is so complex, and has to cover such a variety of types of situations, that no one logical test ... can be expected to meet every case" (p. 148). In underscoring the complexity of making ethical judgments, in *The Virtuous Journalist*, Klaidman and Beauchamp (1987) reject the "false premise that the world is a tidy place of truth and falsity, right and wrong, without the ragged edges of uncertainty and risk." Rather, they argue: "Making moral judgments and handling moral dilemmas require the balancing of often ill-defined competing claims, usually in untidy circumstances" (p. 20).

1. Can I specify exactly what ethical criteria, standards, or perspectives are being applied by me or by others? What is the concrete grounding of the ethical judgment?
2. Can I justify the reasonableness and relevancy of these standards for this particular case? Why are these the most appropriate ethical criteria among the potential ones? Why do these take priority (at least temporarily) over other relevant ones?
3. Can I indicate clearly in what respects the communication being evaluated succeeds or fails in measuring up to the standards? What judgment is justified in this case about the degree of ethicality? Is the most appropriate judgment a specifically targeted and narrowly focused one rather than a broad, generalized, and encompassing one?
4. In this case, to whom is ethical responsibility owed—to which individuals, groups, organizations, or professions? In what ways and to what extent? Which responsibilities take precedence over others? What is the communicator's responsibility to self and to society at large?
5. How do I feel about myself after this ethical choice? Can I continue to "live with myself" in good conscience? Would I want my parents or mate or best friend to know of this choice?
6. Can the ethicality of this communication be justified as a coherent reflection of the

communicator's personal character? To what degree is the choice ethically "out of character"?

7. If called upon in public to justify the ethics of my communication, how adequately could I do so? What generally accepted reasons or rationale could I appropriately offer?
8. Are there precedents or similar previous cases to which I can turn for ethical guidance? Are there significant aspects of this instance that set it apart from all others?
9. How thoroughly have alternatives been explored before settling on this particular choice? Might this choice be less ethical than some of the workable but hastily rejected or ignored alternatives?

Remember that this framework for ethical judgment is not a set of inflexible and universal rules. You must adapt the questions to varied persuasive situations to determine which questions are most applicable. Also, this list may stimulate additional questions. The framework is a starting point, not the final word.

REVIEW AND CONCLUSION

The process of persuasion demands that you make choices about the methods and content you will use in influencing receivers to accept the alternative you advocate. These choices involve issues of desirability and of personal and societal good. What ethical standards will you use in making or judging these choices among techniques, contents, and purposes? What should be the ethical responsibility of a persuader in contemporary society? Obviously, answers to these questions have not been clearly or universally established. However, we must face the questions squarely.

In this chapter, we explored some perspectives, issues, and examples useful in evaluating the ethics of persuasion. Our interest in the nature and effectiveness of persuasive techniques must not overshadow our concern for the ethical use of such techniques. We must examine not only how to but also whether to use persuasive techniques. The issue of "whether to" is both one of audience adaptation and one of ethics. We need to formulate meaningful ethical guidelines, not inflexible rules, for our own persuasive behavior and for use in evaluating the persuasion to which we are exposed.

KEY TERMS

After reading this chapter, you should be able to identify, explain, and give an example of the following key terms or concepts:

ethical issues
responsibility
freedom versus responsibility tension
human nature perspectives
political perspectives
hate speech
situational perspective
legal perspective
dialogical perspective
The Golden Rule
The Platinum Rule
lying and deception
negative presumption against lying
propaganda
demagogue
ambiguous
vague
moral exclusion
racist/sexist language
feminism
invitational rhetoric
going viral
moral character

APPLICATION OF ETHICS

Assume that you are employed in the public relations department of a large corporation. Your supervisor assigns you to present a series of speeches to community groups in a city where your company has just built a new production facility. In the speech prepared by your supervisor, you will describe the services and advantages of the plant that will benefit the community. But during a visit to the plant to familiarize yourself with its operation, you discover that the plant cannot actually deliver most of the services and advantages promised in the speech. Should you go ahead and present the speech as your supervisor prepared it? Should you refuse to give it at all? What changes might you in good conscience make in the speech? Should you make any changes with or without your supervisor's approval? What ethical standards might you use in making your decisions? Why? What additional ethical issues might confront you in this situation? (Adapted from McCammond, 2004.)

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. What ethical standards should be used to evaluate commercial advertising? Describe a current ad or ad campaign that you believe is unethical and justify your judgment.
2. The website of the Center for Media and Democracy presents evaluations of the public relations "spin" of both political and corporate communications (see Weblink 2.13). Search the site for cases under such topic headings as ethics, rhetoric, or propaganda. What is your judgment of the ethics of a public relations example you select from this site?
3. How might a particular actual or hypothetical argument that a worthwhile goal (end) justifies use of unethical persuasive techniques (means) be viewed as an example of the Situational Perspective?
4. What current prominent person might warrant the label of demagogue? What is your justification?
5. What current example of public persuasion might illustrate the tension between freedom of communication and ethical responsibility? How?
6. How might cell phone text-messaging be used by a student (or by students) in unethical ways during an in-class written exam? Why do you consider these uses to be unethical?
7. What ethical standards do you personally believe should guide communication on the Internet?
8. How does hate speech illustrate the process of moral exclusion?
9. Sometimes the necessity to lie in order to be successful in business is justified by the saying "business is business." What does that saying imply to you? Would you accept that saying as a general justification for lying in the workplace? Why or why not?
10. Recall the discussion in chapter 1 of the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) of persuasion. In the central information processing route, the receiver of persuasion consciously and directly focuses on relevant issues, supporting evidence, alternatives, and probable consequences. Give some examples of concrete appeals in the central information processing route that you would consider to be *unethical*. Why? In the peripheral information processing route, the receiver reacts

to emotional appeals, short-cut cues as reminders of something, unconscious yet influential triggers of values, and seemingly insignificant bits of information on the fringes of our awareness. Give some examples of concrete appeals in the peripheral information processing route that you would consider to be *unethical*. Why?

11. Go to Weblink 2.14 and read this analysis of the evidence and argument on both sides of the debate on global warming/climate change. What are some issues of communication ethics discussed? What standards could you use to judge these instances as unethical? Or, as an alternative, Google the topic "climategate" and select to read an article that seems to be evaluating facts and claims on one side or the other. What types of unethical communication/persuasion can you identify and on what grounds do you judge them as unethical?