

Navigating the Ethical Landscape: Organizational Dynamics, Engagement, Authenticity, and Societal Impact

Gisela Gonçalves, Evandro Oliveira & Shannon A. Bowen

LabCom, University of Beira Interior / EAE, Business School, Barcelona / University of South Carolina

gisela.goncalves@labcom.ubi.pt / eoliveira@professor.eae.es / sbowen@sc.edu

Abstract

Contemporary societal challenges - such as the erosion of privacy and data rights, climate change, social injustice, and economic inequality - necessitate the establishment of a comprehensive ethical framework to facilitate both technological advancement and social progress. There is an urgent need for ethical commitments at various levels, including the political, individual, organizational, and societal realms. Organizational dynamics, engagement, authenticity, and societal impact raises different questions that can be explored from various theoretical and empirical perspectives.

Keywords: ethics, authenticity, societal challenges, moral imperative

In the course of history, there are periods when ethics - examination and reflection about behaviour in individual and social life - become particularly important. We are witnessing one of those periods. Contemporary societal challenges - whether it's a loss of privacy and data rights, climate change, social injustice, or economic inequality - require a robust ethical framework to ensure both technological and social progress.

The world is not on track to control climate change, as evidenced by the commitments to reduce greenhouse emissions made by the nearly 200 countries that signed the 2015 Paris Agreement. These pledges are inadequate to restrict the increase in the planet's average temperature to 1.5 degrees Celsius. The environmental crisis highlights the ethical implications of our consumption patterns and industrial practices. As the consequences of global warming become increasingly apparent, a moral obligation arises to consider the long-term impact of our actions on future generations and vulnerable populations. This disparity underscores the need for an ethical framework that prioritizes sustainability and the responsible use of resources, compelling policymakers, corporations and citizens to engage in critical ethical discussions about environmental stewardship and our collective responsibility toward the planet.

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The date of December 10, 2023 marks the 75th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, as the United Nations (UN) President António Guterres noted in his speech, “The world is losing its way. Conflicts are raging. Poverty and hunger are increasing. Inequalities are deepening. The climate crisis is a human rights crisis that is hitting the most vulnerable hardest. Authoritarianism is on the rise. Civic space is shrinking, and the media is under attack from all sides. Gender equality remains a distant dream and women’s reproductive rights are being rolled back”. In light of contemporary challenges, it is imperative to adopt an ethical lens through which to evaluate social structures and practices. A passive stance is insufficient; active efforts are necessary to dismantle systemic inequalities that plague society. An ethical stance demands a commitment to justice, inclusivity and the recognition of the human dignity of all individuals, irrespective of their background, position of influence, or affluence.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2024) recently published the 2023/2024 Human Development Index (HDI) report. According to the study, the world has recovered its pre-pandemic level of development. However, the gap between rich and poor countries is also widening. In 2020 and 2021, for the first time since its creation more than 30 years ago, the HDI, which looks at life expectancy, education and standard of living, dropped by about five years for the first time since it was created more than 30 years ago. This was because of all the crises the world is facing, including the Covid-19 health crisis. This uneven progress is leaving the poorest behind, exacerbating inequality and fueling political polarization around the world. The result is a dangerous gridlock that needs to be addressed urgently through collective action (UNDP, 2024). In order to address the issue of economic inequality, it is urgent that policies which perpetuate wealth concentration and advocate for fair wages, access to education, and healthcare be enforced. Ethical considerations in economic practices compel us to rethink capitalism and consider alternative models that promote shared prosperity and social welfare (Piketty, 2019).

In addition to the societal challenges posed by climate change, social injustice and economic inequality, we are also confronted with pressing issues arising from rapid advances in technology and science. As innovations in fields such as artificial intelligence (AI), biotechnology, and big data transform the human condition, the ethical considerations surrounding these technologies have become increasingly paramount. The implications of these technologies are profound and much remains to be explored as they may impact on privacy, security, and human rights. For instance, AI systems—which are increasingly employed in decision-making processes—unwittingly perpetuate biases inherent in the data on which they are trained. This phenomenon gives rise to critical inquiries concerning equity and discrimination, particularly with regard to marginalized groups that may encounter heightened disadvantage due to the implementation of biased algorithms. A critical evaluation of these implications involves examining how technology can be designed and implemented in ways that prioritize ethical standards. An ethical approach necessitates the establishment of comprehensive regulations that ensure technology serves humanity rather than exploiting it, promoting innovation that aligns with societal well-being (Crawford, 2021).

The Times has published a series of articles regarding the use of surveillance software, colloquially referred to as “bossware.” An article in the series proclaims, “Big brother is watching workers, even at home”. This type of software possesses the capability to monitor the activities of employees, even in their personal residences. Notable examples include PwC’s initiative to track the location of over 20,000 employees in the UK and Uber Eats’ settlement following a legal claim that its facial recognition app is racist, discriminatory, and damaging to ethnic minorities. In 2023, Microsoft enabled employers to utilize its Copilot software to monitor their employees’ health through an integrated “wellbeing” function. Concurrently, Zoom incorporated an artificial intelligence-based feature that detects the emotional states of users during video conferences. With the growth of AI, an expanding array of tools in this field is becoming increasingly available to both individuals and businesses. Proponents of these tools argue

that they improve efficiency and accountability, yet significant ethical concerns persist. The central question, therefore, is whether the potential benefits of enhanced productivity justify the compromises to privacy that these tools entail. A salient concern pertains to the potential for algorithms to exhibit bias, resulting in the disproportionate penalization of specific behaviors or groups. Additionally, the pervasive surveillance that accompanies the integration of AI into organizational practices may erode trust within the organization, potentially fostering a culture of fear and disengagement among employees. These inquiries underscore the delicate equilibrium that organizations must maintain between leveraging technology for operational gains and respecting employee rights and dignity, to warrant socio-economic justice and avoid workers' rights reversals.

In the contemporary era, there is an urgent need for ethical commitments at various levels, including the political, individual, organizational, and societal realms. Ethical commitments are necessary not only to address micro-issues or a few legal concerns, but also to play a central role in finding solutions to global and local challenges. At the political level, ethical commitment requires leaders and policymakers to prioritize the common good over individual or partisan interests. The overarching objective of political ethics is to establish systems that promote equity, justice, and sustainability. This commitment may entail the enactment of legislation that protects human rights, fosters social equity, and incentivizes sustainable practices among businesses. Additionally, governments, public organizations and authorities must engage in transparent and accountable governance, ensuring that their decisions reflect the interests of the communities they serve. Trust in government actors and politicians as sources of information has been shown to be particularly pivotal in risk-related context (Gonçalves et al, 2024). This imperative is particularly salient in the contemporary era, often termed the “permacrisis”, which is characterized by a protracted period of instability and insecurity resulting from the accumulation of catastrophic events, including pandemics, wars, mass **migration**, and climate change.

At the individual level, ethical commitment entails a personal dedication to principles that prioritize integrity, fairness, and respect for others. Individuals must recognize their role as active participants in society, understanding that their choices—whether in consumer behavior, civic engagement, or advocacy—impact not only their immediate surroundings but also larger societal trends. This awareness fosters a sense of personal responsibility, encouraging individuals to align their personal values with their actions. This cultural shift can catalyze meaningful change within society. For instance, consumers are increasingly cognizant of the ethical implications of their purchasing decisions, leading to a rise in demand for products that are sustainably sourced and produced under fair labor practices. This shift in consumer preferences has compelled organizations to introspect and commit to ethical standards that align with the evolving societal expectations. By making informed consumer choices, individuals can advocate for corporate transparency and social responsibility, thereby holding brands accountable for their commitment to ethical practices.

At the organizational level, ethical commitment should be integrated into the very framework of a company's operations and governance. Ethical considerations have the capacity to influence strategic decision-making processes, thereby ensuring that organizations align their business practices with their stated values. This transformation requires a cultural shift within the organization, cultivating an environment in which ethical behavior is rewarded and critical conversations concerning social responsibility are actively encouraged.

At the societal level, we call upon scholars to educate in the areas of critical thinking and moral autonomy, to avoid the egocentric and sociocentric thinking mistakes of the past and to focus on the moral worth of principles. This ethical paradigm calls for us to leave behind the outmoded idea of “mutually beneficial” solutions, and use our rational ability of ethical analysis to arrive at the moral principle driving a conflict, seeking an ethical solution (Bowen & Heath, 2020). Using climate change as a case study, we argued that ethical analysis is the intelligent and strategic way forward, creating a moral core

for decision making. This approach is applicable to many of the problems we face today, such as the increasing number of wars, using lawfare to persecute political opponents, or the use of AI to monitor citizens for “social credit scoring,” which has been deemed patently unethical (but still occurs).

Strategically adopting ethics as a core value can enhance an organization’s authenticity (Bowen, 2010), fostering a consistently ethical reputation, building consumer trust, and promoting stakeholders loyalty. Organizations are no longer merely reacting to societal expectations; they are expected to proactively engage in ethical discourse and contribute to solutions for pressing societal issues. This engagement can manifest through initiatives such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), in which companies develop programs that address community needs; through corporate social advocacy and CEO activism, in which businesses take public stances on social and political issues; or creating shared value (CSV) by actively participating in community development.

However, as organizations strive to embody these ethical commitments, challenges such as corporate hypocrisy and inauthentic behavior can undermine their efforts. For example, cases of greenwashing—where companies exaggerate or falsely claim environmental benefits to mislead consumers— or homocommodification – pandering to diverse gender groups - create distrust and can backfire, leading to public backlash (Place et al., 2021). This highlights the need for genuine commitment that goes beyond superficial marketing and public relations tactics.

We advocate for a management logic that is centered on the principles of biocentrism (Oliveira, 2024b), which prioritize the concepts of regeneration and sustainability as foundational principles for the governance of organizations. This approach underscores a holistic responsibility that extends beyond the paradigm of people, planet, and profit, to include the well-being and health of employees and the organization, as an ethical imperative. By fostering a balance between business operations and a genuine commitment to the individuals who create and sustain the organization, biocentric management promotes a harmonious integration of corporate responsibility and sustainable growth. This integration occurs through an ethical, integrated approach that considers the sacred and the profane elements of business life, using a Durkheimian approach (Oliveira, 2024a).

The eight papers selected for this special issue of Communication Studies propose different approaches to reflect on the ethical imperative that permeates the various social and environmental challenges facing our society. From different theoretical foundations and with different empirical approaches, they reflect on how public and private organizations navigate the ethical landscape, and how publics respond to their ethical positioning. As editors, we hope that this special issue will make a significant contribution to the theoretical and empirical analysis of the ethical debate in the field of strategic and organizational communication, while at the same time helping to envision practical ways for ethical engagement with social impact. At a time of growing structural inequalities, increasing disinformation and polarization of citizens, critical reflection that can be linked to social and communicative practices, the implementation of public policies and profound systemic interventions seems to us a much needed theoretical-practical endeavor to promote the common good.

The first article, authored by Sónia P. Sebastião, examines Corporate Social Innovation (CSI) through a communication lens, emphasizing the crucial role of strategic communication in its implementation. It argues that strategic communication is not just a tool, but a constitutive principle for collaboration between organizations and stakeholders, and proposes a theoretical model with four key elements: assessment, strategic intent, alignment, and organizational principle. The study distinguishes CSI from corporate social responsibility and creating shared value, positions it as a proactive, innovative approach to addressing social and environmental issues, and provides a practical framework for companies to effectively integrate CSI into their strategies.

Social and environmental issues continue to be the focus of the second article, but this time from a non-corporate perspective. Victor Manuel Marí-Sáez, Yiheng Wang, and Hanae Trola Skalli, present “Organizational cultures and communicative discourses of Spanish NGOs facing the Sustainable

Development Goals in the digital space”. Their study highlights the interplay between organizational culture and communicative practices, showing how even organizations with primarily institutional cultures incorporate elements of participatory communication. The findings also reveal a wide range of approaches to incorporating and promoting the SDGs, reflecting the diverse nature of Spanish NGOs.

Sustainable development is then addressed from the perspective of citizens in the research presented by Isabel Ruiz-Mora, Daniel Guerrero-Navarro and

Ana M. Lucía-Casademunt, in “Bridging the Gap: Understanding Spanish society’s perception of purpose-driven companies and their role in sustainable development”. This article explores Spanish society’s perspective on purpose-driven businesses as a sustainable model. It assesses Spain’s commitment to sustainability and aligns corporate expectations with citizen responsibilities for societal and environmental improvement. The key findings of the survey revealed a significant authenticity gap between expectations and perceptions of purpose-driven companies. While many citizens believe that such companies are necessary for sustainable development, a large portion remains unaware of their existence.

The following two articles present studies of organizations’ discourses on CSR and sustainability, with a focus on strategic digital social media communication. The article by Fernando Rocha and Ricardo Morais makes a valuable contribution to the study of strategic communication in the sports sector. Their research provides a useful framework for analyzing the Football Foundation/Liga Portugal’s CSR communication strategies on Facebook. The findings provide insights into how organizations in the sports sector can use communication to achieve their corporate social responsibility goals, while highlighting the importance of aligning communication with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Daniel Reis Silva, Fábila Pereira Lima and Samora N’zinga Soares Cardoso’s article focuses on corporate greenwashing in the mining industry in Brazil. They found a significant lack of discussion of climate change and dam safety in the discourse of Vale, a major Brazilian mining company. Their findings suggest that Vale employs a multifaceted greenwashing strategy, using ambiguous narratives and visual elements to obscure negative impacts while promoting a positive corporate reputation. Their analysis of Instagram shows that these issues are deliberately suppressed in the company’s messaging, resulting in a lack of authenticity.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on public sector communication is a common element in the research presented in the following articles, which analyze government communication in two different countries. Focusing on Italy’s National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), Leonardo Piromalli, Dario Germani and Alessandro Lovari used a mixed-methods approach to analyze the government’s official social media communication project, Italia Domani. The findings indicate that Italia Domani has a relatively low social media engagement and a general messaging strategy, resulting in limited public awareness of the NRRP. In addition, there is a clear separation between public sector and political communication, reflecting efforts towards transparency and accountability in the midst of complex challenges such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

The challenges and adaptations of internal communication within Lithuanian ministries as they transitioned to hybrid work during the pandemic were the focus of the article authored by Vytautas Beniusis. Based on semi-structured interviews with department heads and internal communication specialists, this study highlights that while hybrid work introduced new digital communication methods, it also posed significant challenges in terms of maintaining strong interpersonal relationships, providing timely feedback, and communicating effectively in a remote environment. As in the previous study, this research also examines ethical considerations in public sector communication, emphasizing the importance of open and transparent communication, particularly in times of organizational change and crisis, while prioritizing the well-being of the public.

Alexandre Duarte offers a compelling case study on the impact of CEO activism on brand reputation, specifically examining the backlash against the CEO of Prozis following public comments on

abortion in Portugal. The results of an online survey indicate that while many respondents disagreed with the CEO's statements, a majority supported the idea that CEOs have the right to express their opinions publicly. Furthermore, most respondents believed that Prozis' reputation had been damaged by these statements; however, more than half said that they would continue to buy Prozis products. The findings highlight notable generational and political differences in responses to CEO activism, authenticity, and public speech.

The final article in this special issue of the *Journal of Communication Studies* was developed by a team of researchers from the Universitas Pendidikan Nasional in Bali, Indonesia, and led by Jonathan Latupeirissa. Their research examines the impact of inclusive communication on audience engagement and attitudes within public relations, using a systematic literature review of Scopus. The results show that inclusive communication fosters perceptions of authenticity, credibility, and trustworthiness, thereby increasing engagement and positive attitudes. However, the study also identifies challenges, including unconscious bias, lack of awareness, and the complexity of digital communication. The findings highlight the ethical responsibility of public relations professionals to foster diverse stakeholders and promote meaningful relationships, emphasizing transparency, cultural sensitivity, and bias mitigation in communication practices.

It is no accident that each of these papers addresses some aspect of the creation or loss of *authenticity* as an ethical construct. These papers, among the best presented at ECREA-Organizational and Strategic Communication (OSC) and the Global Strategic Communication Consortium (GSCC) Conclave, offer an insight into what factors constitute an ethical organization.¹ Authenticity was conceptualized as being at the core of an organization to create a normative good for the communication function (Bowen, 2010). Each of these papers extends that perspective and addresses the epistemological question of "How do we know what is good" in an organization.

Each author answers that question with different themes, topics and methods, concluding in their own right that ethical behavior requires authenticity. Strategic intelligence requires deep examination of and reflection upon one's ethical choices and stances. An ethical approach to a complex world demands authenticity and the creation of a strategic organizational communication in which influence, manipulation, and disingenuousness are forfeited in the interest of authentic moral principle.

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1. For a complete overview of the works presented at the ECREA OSC interim conference in Lisbon, please see the BoA "The normative imperative: sociopolitical challenges of strategic and organizational communication" (Oliveira & Gonçalves, 2023) and for other works related to the conference and topic see the book published by LabCom Books "Ethics and Society: Challenges in Organizational and Public Communication (Oliveira & Gonçalves, 2024c).

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