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## Politics and Ethics: Making the Right Call

by **Kati Tusinski Berg**, Division Chair

Wisconsin has become the epicenter of the political universe – a contentious collective bargaining dispute and now a dead-heat gubernatorial recall election.

The past 15 months have been nasty and divisive for the residents of Wisconsin. Since my husband is a public school teacher, I have felt entangled in this political battle from the beginning. Honestly I didn't think things could get much worse until a couple of weeks ago when I got an email from a student who works for my local congressman.



This student had landed a full-time position in the congressman's office and had enjoyed working in the office. That was until he was asked to compromise both his professional and personal ethics when he was asked to forge signatures for a fake candidate so that the lieutenant governor would have more time to raise money before the recall election.

My student refused to participate and was chastised for not succumbing to the pressure. After a couple of weeks, he decided to quit since he was "dealing with some backwards people."

In my opinion it is appalling that a 21-year-old kid has more ethics than the veteran political staffers. Yet, I am not surprised given the toxic political discourse in this country.

This situation also gave me the opportunity to pause and reflect on my role as a teacher and researcher of ethics. In my public relations courses, students seem to think ethical dilemmas won't be that big a deal when they are in the industry. However, this recent case proves otherwise. This student quit a full-time job one month before graduation without having anything else lined up because he could not engage in unethical political tactics.

When researching lobbying ethics, many questionable tactics arise that need to be discussed from both an ethical and legal perspective. As we prepare for the AEJMC Annual Conference in Chicago, I hope we all take a moment to reflect on the potential impact we can have on society – with our students, our academic colleagues, our industry colleagues, and even our neighbors.

Additionally, I encourage all of you to attend our preconference teaching workshop, [Ethics of Politics: Teaching it Well](#), which MED is co-sponsoring with the Political Communication Interest Group.

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## Applying Ethical Theory to Real Life Moral Dilemmas

by **Matt J. Duffy**

As journalism educators, we should pay attention real-time examples of newsroom misconduct that can encourage discussions about proper ethical behavior for journalists. At the same time, we should make sure that we offer clear boundaries about what's ethically justifiable in most circumstances. The U.K.'s ever-expanding, phone-hacking scandal offers a great opportunity for classroom discussion.

Sky News recently [admitted](#) that it too had hacked into private emails in order to pursue a story. The outlet accessed emails of a couple at the center of a faked-death, insurance scam investigation. Hacking into emails is illegal under British law.

Rather than admit wrongdoing, the editorial chief defended their actions.

"We stand by these actions as editorially justified and in the public interest," John Ryley said in a statement.

Sky News' reasoning exemplifies a lazy, utilitarian approach to ethics in which the "greater good" may justify seemingly unethical acts—such as violating the right to privacy. And one certainly can justify these actions with the nebulous approach often presented in John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism.

But, we do our journalism students a disservice by not giving some specific ground rules to follow. Oftentimes, our textbooks introduce ethical concepts that leave too much room for rationalization.

In general, we teach that Immanuel Kant's ethics are an ethics of duty and demand strict adherence to principles like complete truth-telling and avoidance of all deception. Then, we present utilitarianism as a more "realistic" ethical guide that allows for deception or other dubious ethical measures in order to satisfy certain "ends" for society.



Sometimes, utilitarianism becomes so watered down that it doesn't appear to have any rigid guidance at all. After all, one can justify almost any act by simply appealing to the abstract "public interest."

I would caution that both ethical philosophies actually provide high bars against questionable moral practices. Mill made sure to include five principles of justice that would prohibit lying, deception and invasion of privacy—except for the most rare of cases. As Deni Elliot reminded us in her JMME piece "[Getting Mill Right](#)," the following principles should not be overridden lightly: Legal rights, moral rights, just desserts, keeping promises, and commitment to impartiality.

Even under the pretenses of utilitarianism, invading someone's private emails in violation of a law is nearly impossible to justify. The benefit to society would have to be great indeed to warrant an override of Mill's principles of justice. Digging up information on a person already under government investigation hardly satisfies this requirement—despite any claims toward the "public interest." Sky News' actions are ethically unjustifiable.

Commitment to truth-telling, respect for privacy and avoidance of deception should be cornerstones of any ethical guidance—no matter the specific philosophy one follows.

Journalists should have strong ethical foundations—no lying, no hacking emails, no routine deception.

Perhaps a situation will arise where one of these foundations must be examined. But, we should stress this situation should be the extremely rare exception, not business as usual.

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## Preaching to the Choir: The Importance of the Stand-alone Ethics Class

By **Ryan J. Thomas**  
Graduate Student Representative

It is easy to make the case for why media ethics should be a core component of an undergraduate education in mass communication and its allied fields.

We can quite legitimately point to the fact that the journalists, public relations professionals, advertisers, editors, photojournalists, and columnists of the future sit in our classrooms, which places upon us a moral responsibility to instill in them an appreciation for ethical practice and understanding of the pivotal role the mass media play in a democratic society. In so doing, we position ethics as equally critical to a communication education as any “workshop” or “skills” class.

This is all well and good, and I sense that perhaps, given this newsletter’s audience, I am “preaching to the choir,” so to speak. But I think back to a comment a student made on one of my (anonymous) course evaluations at Washington State University a couple semesters ago. Paraphrased, the student praised the class and my instruction of it but added that they thought the class as a whole was unnecessary, given that ethics are individual and personal and therefore subjective.

When I read the comment, my heart sank. For me, I cannot imagine an undergraduate mass communication curriculum without ethics at the core. What an affront! Was I right and the student wrong?

On occasion, I have found the student’s observations to be true during class discussions. Indeed, my ears prick up whenever a student begins a sentence with “I think...” Of course, opinions and personal preferences are welcome, but how do we, as instructors, ensure that our conversations advance the goal of understanding the role of the mass media in a democracy?

One of the things I caution my media ethics classes at Washington State University about is the tendency – of which we are all guilty – of making kneejerk criticisms of contemporary media practice. It is all too easy and comfortable to dismiss the media as “biased” or “unethical” whenever we see something in the media we find particularly disagreeable.

Instead, I ask my students to reflexively examine the role of media in society, a task for which classic political philosophy is always useful. What are the social responsibilities of journalists (if

any), and where do they come from? What should we expect from the mass media and what should we not? These are broad, macro-level questions.

However, the student is quite correct in his or her assertion that ethics also are located at the micro-level, in individual decisions made on a day-to-day basis. We can talk all we like about the roles and responsibilities of the mass media as an institution, but when push comes to shove we are dealing with individual actors making specific decisions unique to specific contexts, are we not?

This is quite the conundrum, but for me it is precisely this tension between macro-level institutions and micro-level decisions that makes ethics such a fascinating and complex field of study.

Grounding a class in classic political philosophy and the work of important ethics theorists and using this grounding as a jumping-off point to discuss contemporary case studies provides students with a richer, more nuanced understanding of the role of the mass media in a pluralistic democracy and the ability to connect this role to contemporary media practice. Plus, it exposes students to some of the greatest thinkers of all time. Seeing students not only responding positively to the likes of Aristotle, Rousseau, Locke, and Dewey but connecting their works to the day's breaking news has been extremely rewarding.

It is for these reasons that I strongly believe that media ethics should be a required component of any mass communication curriculum (by which I mean a required, standalone class rather than something half-heartedly woven into pre-professional classes or as a malnourished adjunct to a media law class).

For one, students entering the mass communication field need this grounding to prepare them for the kinds of challenges they may face. But beyond that, it prepares all students, whatever their major, to become informed critics of the mass media, to understand the media's fiduciary role in a democratic society, and to make accurate and reasoned assessments of media performance based less on reflexive opinion and more on this ascribed role.

After all, whether we are journalists, advertisers, scientists, or nurses, we are all *citizens* in need of a robust, responsible, and ethical media

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## Remember Rush Kidder

by **Jay Black**

One of the world’s most influential media ethicists would not like being called a media ethicist.

Rushworth Kidder, who died on March 5 at the age of 67, was far too humble and much too eclectic to label himself a media ethics scholar or practitioner. On the other hand, he would self-identify as a poet and journalist, a dabbler in quantum physics, an author and lecturer, a pretty decent piano player, and a fanatic about civility in public discourse.

The long-time *Christian Science Monitor* writer and columnist with a Ph.D from Columbia University in English and Comparative Literature spent the past two decades heading up the Institute for Global Ethics.

He had a strong interest in 20th century poets E. E. Cummings and Dylan Thomas. But he was a man of the people—comfortable interacting with normal folks and world leaders, and organizing the best insights from both groups into highly readable and extremely provocative prose.

Media ethics students may know Kidder in passing, perhaps from a brief note in a textbook or class lecture that described moral struggles as occurring when situations make it necessary for us to choose between two (or more) equally compelling, but incompatible, alternatives. Kidder called these “right-versus-right” decisions.

His 1995 book, *How Good People Make Tough Choices: Resolving the Dilemmas of Ethical Living*, described conflicts between core moral values that resonate with media practitioners: truth versus loyalty, self versus community, justice versus mercy, long-term benefits versus short-term benefits. Kidder urged his readers and audiences to engage in rigorous moral exercises about these situations in order to achieve “ethical fitness.”

Or students might have been introduced to Kidder’s work on values, particularly his 2004 book *Shared Values for a Troubled World: Conversations with Men and Women of Conscience*. In that work Kidder concluded that thoughtful people the world over agreed on the centrality of love, truth, fairness, freedom, unity, tolerance, responsibility, and respect for life. In short, he



Rush Kidder

eschewed moral relativism.

They may not have been exposed to the other 10 books that Kidder authored between 1973 and 2010:

- *Good Kids, Tough Choices: How Parents Can Help Their Children Do the Right Thing* (2010)
- *The Ethics Recession: Reflections on the Moral Underpinnings of the Current Economic Crisis* (2009)
- *Moral Courage: Taking Action When Your Values are Put to the Test* (2005)
- *Heartland Ethics: Voices from the American Midwest* (as editor) (1992)
- *In the Backyards of Our Lives and Other Essays* (1992)
- *Global Ethics: A Quartet of Interviews* (1992)
- *Reinventing the Future: Global Goals for the 21st Century* (1989)
- *An Agenda for the Twenty-First Century* (1987)
- *E.E. Cummings: An Introduction to the Poetry* (1979)
- *Dylan Thomas: The Country of the Spirit* (1973)

(A personal side-note: My copy of *Moral Courage: Ethics in Action* was a gift from a dear friend who had purchased the book on e-bay for \$9. The cover on the white paperback says in cannot-be-missed type: UNCORRECTED PROOF NOT FOR SALE. I offered the book to Dr. Kidder during one of our panel discussions, and he laughed about the irony of ripping off the author and publisher of *Moral Courage*. As I recall, we simultaneously said something about Ethics Inaction.)

Obituaries and “remembrances” of Rush Kidder remind us that we have lost a gentle giant (actually, he was about the height of Jim Carey, Patrick Plaisance, or me...but that’s another story).

The *Christian Science Monitor* said:

“ In a world where religion, morality, politics, and philosophy too often divide people, Dr. Kidder used ethics as an intercultural language to help people deal with challenges that in another age might have been settled by clerical decree or codes of conduct. He often noted that when faced with the choice of meting out justice or showing mercy, the world benefits more from mercy.”

His Institute for Global Ethics described him as a celebrated journalist and ethicist who devoted his life to expanding the importance and understanding of practical ethics education.

“Widely praised as a provocative speaker and stimulating author, Kidder’s lifelong goal was to make ethics both practical and practiced, bridging the gap between moral philosophy and daily life. He spent much of his career calling for less polarization and greater cooperation — in politics, at school, within communities — by noting that many of life’s greatest challenges involve right-versus-right dilemmas between competing moral arguments.”

Several media ethicists were among the 79 who posted “remembrances” on Permalink shortly after Kidder’s death:

Carl Hausman said “Rush left a sprawling and indelible legacy. He was the greatest popularizer of knowledge I’ve ever known, and made the topic of ethics accessible to everyone. I think his greatest single accomplishment was to convince people that ethics was a concrete and tangible subject that could be applied to business and everyday life — not just pondered in the abstract.”

Bob Steele said Kidder was “thoughtful and very skilled at helping all of us address the complex ethical issues of our neighborhoods and our global society. His voice on values was clear, strong and distinct. He was the philosophical practitioner who was a practical philosopher.”

Tom Cooper described him as “the genuine article who was fully committed to thinking and living ethically. His initiative and thinking brightened the ethics torch, one he carried worldwide to build integrity links with many other great spirits... Rush’s books and lectures were always radiant, thoughtful, and inspiring... (H)e leaves a remarkable legacy of excellence, good cheer, and virtue.”

May he rest in peace, and may we read, re-read, and take to heart his insights into practical and applied ethics.

*\* Jay Black was founding co-editor of the Journal of Mass Media Ethics. His most recent book, co-authored with Chris Roberts, is Doing Ethics in Media: Theories and Practical Applications (Routledge: 2011).*

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## Registration Available for Pre-conference Workshop on Teaching The Ethics of Politics

by **Jan Leach**

Teaching Committee Chair

The upcoming presidential election is significant opportunity for teaching media ethics. From campaign claims and superficial sound bites to covering race and talking about religion, this year's Media Ethics Division pre-AEJMC teaching workshop will explore ethics issues in politics and elections, all within the framework of the current campaign.

Best of all for workshop attendees, participants will come away with practical ideas and teaching tools that can be incorporated into classes immediately.

"The workshop is designed to provide very practical professional development for media ethics teachers and those wanting to include media ethics across the curriculum," says Dr. Ginny Whitehouse, professor of journalism at Eastern Kentucky University and co-director of the annual workshop. "We have folks who come every year; we have folks for whom it will be their first year, and we want everybody to walk away feeling that they have new ideas to talk to their students about."

The "Ethics and Politics: Tools to Teach Well" pre-conference workshop precedes the AEJMC conference on Wednesday, Aug. 8, from 12:30 to 6:30 p.m. The workshop is presented by MED and AEJMC's Political Communication Interest Group.

Speakers and topics for the teaching workshop include:

- Robert Denton, Virginia Tech, on using new media technology in political elections. Denton is co-editor of the 2010 book "Communicator in Chief: How Barack Obama Used New Media Technology to Win the White House,"
- Lee Wilkins, University of Missouri, and Bill Babcock, Southern Illinois University, on how to develop an Ad Watch and a News Fairness Watch. Wilkins will demonstrate how she has used ad watches with classes. Babcock will discuss defining "fairness" and having students monitor election coverage for fairness.
- John Watson, American University, on how to talk about racism. Watson will focus on framing race as an ethics question and helping students see it that way in campaigns.
- Whitehouse, Eastern Kentucky, on how to cover religion in the context of culture. Whitehouse will involve workshop participants in an exercise to help them understand how they feel about different religions. They will discuss how religion is culture and how

that fits into political communication.

- Mark Poepsel, Loyola University New Orleans, and Chad Painter, University of Missouri, on using “The Daily Show” and “The Colbert Report” to generate healthy political dialog. Poepsel is representing the Political Communication Interest Group.

Another highlight of the afternoon will be break-out roundtables, called “Best Ideas and Biggest Questions.” Participants will share teaching plans or activities with others in small groups. Each person is asked to bring 30 copies of a fully developed teaching tactic or tool to distribute.

Whitehouse says that in addition to collecting others’ ideas, people will get specific feedback on their own concepts and activities. All the roundtable ideas will be posted on MED’s [teaching resources website](#) after the convention.

Whitehouse and Babcock have worked together organizing the MED pre-conference workshop for more than 15 years. Partnering with other divisions and interest groups has helped MED offer new and fresh ideas, she says.

The idea for the teaching workshop examining ethics in the realm of politics came about because of the national election and focusing on a subject that would appeal to MED members and to the convention as a whole, Whitehouse says.

“This is the year to do it,” she says.

“The goal is that as you’re preparing your fall syllabi you can list this idea and add this idea (from the Workshop),” Whitehouse says. “And not just in ethics classes but in reporting and other news and journalism courses.”

Preregistration for the teaching workshop is required because participation is limited. Cost is \$50 for faculty and \$40 for graduate students. For more information about Ethics and Politics: Tools to Teach Well” pre-conference workshop, contact Whitehouse at [ginny.whitehouse@eku.edu](mailto:ginny.whitehouse@eku.edu).

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## Mark Your Calendar For The Third Media Ethics Division Social



by **Bastiaan Vanacker**  
Programming Vice Chair

Two years ago, then programming chair Shannon Bowen added the Media Ethics Social to the MED Denver conference line up. Ever the savvy PR practitioner, she recognized the beneficial effects of some nightly schmoozing over finger food and a beverage, at a safe distance from the hustle and bustle of the conference site.

Those who attended that year certainly will remember the pleasant evening we spent in the cozy, historical Denver Press Club. After the well-attended repeat last year in St. Louis, there is no reason to abandon this young tradition when we will be setting up camp in Chicago this

summer.

Just like last year, our social will be a late night affair, immediately following our 8:30 p.m. business meeting on Friday Aug. 10. Fortunately, as Hegel famously observed, the owl of Minerva only flies at dusk. We are confident that we should be able to wrap up the business meeting in a little over an hour so that we can kick off our get together around 9:45 p.m.

With our conference hotel being located smack in the middle of Chicago's entertainment district during prime bachelor party season, securing a location that was affordable and willing to host a few dozen non-binge drinking media ethicists was not an easy task. However, we managed to secure a roped off area of the beautiful Irish [D4 Pub](#), a mere three blocks East from our hotel.

Thanks to the generous donation of *Media Ethics* magazine (\$300) and the Center for Digital Ethics and Policy at the School of Communication (my employer) at Loyola University Chicago (\$500, thank you Dean Heider), hopefully we won't even have to use MED funds to provide attendees with a small buffet. While the conference is still half-a-year away, please pencil in this evening in your conference planner as soon as you have made your travel reservations and

RSVP with Bastiaan Vanacker at [bvancker@luc.edu](mailto:bvancker@luc.edu).

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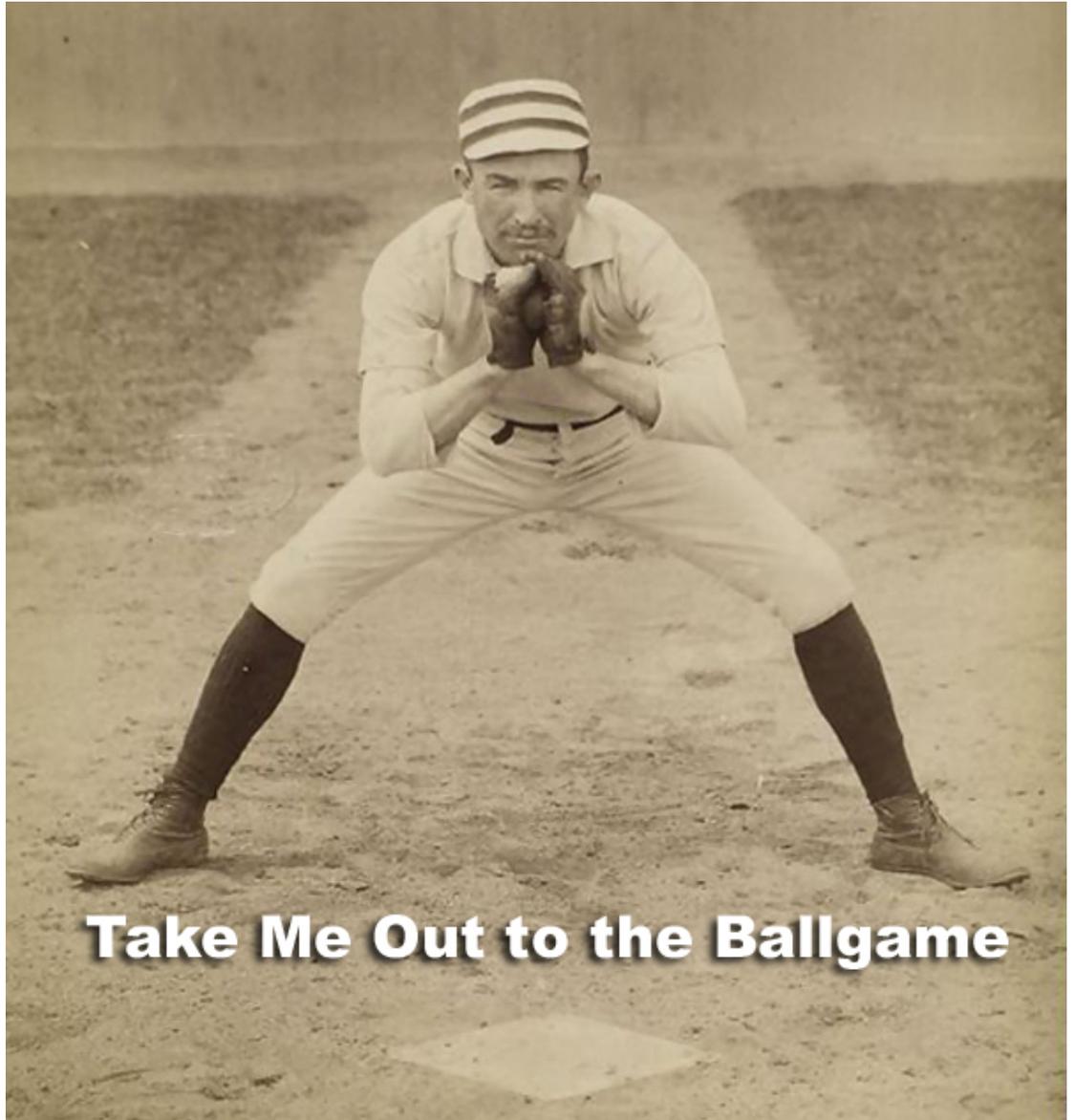
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## ...COURTESY OF BASTIAAN VANACKER

The first official day of the conference is traditionally marked by the opening reception. A great opportunity to network, meet old friends, have an awkward conversation when you run into that person your search committee ended up *not* giving the job to, and eat more mini BBQ meatballs than you probably should.

However, if standing around in a hotel ballroom with the same people you will be running into for the next three days is not your idea of enjoying the great city of Chicago, join us for a night

at Wrigley. I have purchased eight tickets for the Cubs game against the Cincinnati Reds that evening (Th. Aug. 9), the only Cubs evening (7 p.m.) game during the conference. This is a great opportunity to enjoy the company of your colleagues in one of America's most storied ballparks. Depending on time and interest, we can meet for a pre-game drink and some food at my place, two miles of miles south of the field. Tickets are \$60 each. Interested? Email me at [bvanacker@luc.edu](mailto:bvanacker@luc.edu).

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## International Symposium on Digital Ethics Paper Call

The center for [Digital Ethics & Policy](#) at Loyola University Chicago will be holding its second International Symposium on Digital Ethics on Oct. 29. The keynote speaker will be Professor Sherry Turkle from M.I.T.



We are looking for papers on digital ethics. Topics might include privacy, anonymity, grieving, free speech, intellectual property, hacking, scamming, surveillance, information mining, transparency, digital citizenship, or anything else relating to ethical questions and digital technology, or ethical use of digital technologies in journalism, advertising and public relations.

Abstracts should propose original research that has not been presented or published elsewhere.

Authors of accepted papers will be eligible for up to \$400 in travel funds to be able to attend the Chicago symposium. The author(s) of the top student paper will be eligible for up to \$1,000 in travel funds.

With the author's consent, the best papers will be given top consideration for inclusion in a special issue of the Journal of Mass Media Ethics on digital ethics.

Abstracts are due by midnight CST on June 15, should follow APA or MLA style and be no longer than 500 words, not including references.

Send your submission in a MS Word document attachment to [contact@digitaethics.org](mailto:contact@digitaethics.org), and please write *Digital Ethics Symposium submission* in the subject line.

You can send questions to the same email address.

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