Laws and regulations are not the only controls on the media. Informal controls, stemming from within the media are shaped by the workings of external forces such as pressure groups, consumers, and advertisers, are also important. There are many everyday situations in the media where tough questions, about what to do or not do, have to be faced; most of these issues do not involve laws and regulations, but rather the tougher questions of what’s right, fair, or ethical.

**PERSONAL ETHICS**

Ethics are rules of conduct or principles of morality that point us toward the right or best way to act in a situation, and these principles can provide a framework for analyzing what is proper in examining choices and justifying our actions. Though helpful, these principles do not contain magic answers to all ethical dilemmas. Note also that these ethical principles are rooted in Western thought, and other cultures may have developed totally different systems.

**Ethical Principles**

**The Principle of the Golden Mean.** Moral virtue lies between two extremes. Moderation, as Aristotle noted, is the key. This belief suggests that the proper way of behaving lies between doing too much and doing too little.

**The Categorical Imperative.** What is right for one is right for all. German philosopher Immanuel Kant is identified with this ethical system. To measure the correctness of our behavior, says Kant, we should act according to the rules that we would want to see universally applied. To Kant, categorical means unconditional—no extenuating circumstances and no exceptions. Right is right (based on examining our conscience) and should be done, no matter what the circumstances. The categorical imperative is discovered by an examination of our conscience. If, after performing an act, we feel uneasy or guilty, we have probably violated our conscience.

**The Principle of Utility.** Utility is defined as the greatest benefit for the greatest number, and 19th Century philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill are credited with outlining the principles of utilitarianism. In their philosophy, ethical behavior starts when we determine what
is right or wrong by considering what will yield the best ratio of good to bad for the general society. Utilitarians ask how much good is promoted and how much evil is restrained by different courses of behavior. First calculate all the consequences, both good and bad, that would result from different actions, then choose the alternative that maximizes value and minimizes loss.

**The Veil of Ignorance.** Justice is blind, said philosopher John Rawls, who argued that justice emerges when everyone is treated without social differentiations. Rawls believed that all parties concerned in a problem situation should be placed behind a virtual barrier where roles and social differentiations are gone and each participant is treated as an equal member of society as a whole.

**Principle of Self-Determination.** Do not treat people as a means to an end. Closely associated with a Judeo-Christian ethics, this system might also be simplified to “Love your neighbor as yourself.” All human beings have unconditional value apart from any circumstances. A corollary to this is that no one should allow himself or herself to be treated as a means to someone else’s ends.

**A Model for Individual Ethical Decisions**

This model, adapted from the work of Ralph Potter, can help media professionals evaluate and examine their decisions.

_Definitions ➔ Values ➔ Principles ➔ Loyalties ➔ Action_

This model asks us to consider four aspects of a situation before taking action:

1. **Define the situation.** What are the facts, and what are our alternative possible actions?
2. **What values are involved?** Which values are more relevant to deciding a course of action?
3. **What ethical principles apply?** Besides these five, many other systems are available too.
4. **Where do our loyalties lie?** To whom do we owe our highest moral duty and obligation?

**Acculturation**

Simply defined, acculturation in a media context means the tendency of reporters or other media professionals to accept the ideas, attitudes, and opinions of the group that they cover or with whom they have a great deal of contact. Acculturation is not necessarily bad, but it can cause concern when it has the potential to affect journalistic judgment.
PERFORMANCE CODES

Codes of conduct or ethics have been set and standardized within most areas of the media in order to help professionals make ethical decisions more quickly and with more uniformity. One of the chief differences between other professional code systems and those used by the media is that poor performance in the media will result in few, if any, disciplinary sanctions; there are no review boards in the media to grant or revoke licenses.

The Print Media

Several journalists reacted against the excesses of jazz journalism by founding the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) in 1923. They then adopted seven Canons of Journalism:

- responsibility
- freedom of the press
- independence
- accuracy
- impartiality
- fair play
- decency

The canons are essentially prescriptive (telling what ought to be done) rather than proscriptive (telling what should be avoided), and they represent the first concrete attempts by journalists to strive for professionalism in their field.

The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) has also adopted codes of conduct, and have often revived them as journalistic ethics became more problematical. The 1996 revision revolves centers on four main principles:

1. See the truth and report it. Journalists should be honest, fair, and courageous in reporting the news.
2. Minimize harm. Journalists should treat sources, subjects, and colleagues as human beings with respect.
3. Act independently. Journalists should be free of any obligation other than the public’s right to know.
4. Be accountable. Journalists should be accountable to their audience and to each other.

Individual professional journalism associations or media organizations have adopted ethical codes as well.

Broadcasting

Though several broadcast organizations have attempted to codify broadcasting and programming ethical systems, none has survived intact with any specificity or industry enforceability. The V-Chip technology illustrates a unique compromise between informal and formal controls in that the TV industry needed to “voluntary” adopt ratings codes so that the mandatory hardware of the V chip would have a software system with which to work.
Program producers rate content using an age-based scale (TV-G, suitable for general audiences; to TV-M, mature audiences). Special advisories for specific content (S=sexual content; V=violence) are also displayed. In its 2007 report on TV violence, the FCC said the V-Chip was helpful but was not effective at protecting young people from violent content.

**Motion Pictures**

The demand for movie codes of conduct emerged from the excesses of the 1920s. In an attempt to preclude imposed censorship laws, the film industry created a new industry organization that set up a detailed list of proscriptive guidelines for acceptable movie content. The governing body, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, ruled that failure to adhere to their codes could result in fines or, more importantly, refusal to grant a film the organization’s seal of approval, and thus effectively bar the films from being seen in most movie theaters.

By the 1950s, with Hollywood’s monopoly of production-distribution-exhibition now gone, and rising competition from TV coming on strong, not to mention a relaxing of the country’s moral attitudes, the highly specific code essentially faded away. It was soon replaced, however, with a new voluntary movie rating system adopted by the Motion Picture Association of America. The MPAA set up a simple movie rating system that, for its enforcement, depended on cooperation from the film makers themselves, theater owners, and the movie going public itself. The rating system is the one currently in effect today: G, PG, PG-13, R, and NC-17.

The current rating system leaves producers free to include whatever scenes they like as long as they realize that by so doing, they may restrict the size of their potential audience. For the system to work, everyone must cooperate: producers, distributors, theater owners, and parents. There is no government involvement, and there are no fines.

**The Advertising Industry**

Like other media industries, the advertising industry has professional organizations that have also adopted professional codes of conduct. Advertising codes address, among other things, misleading price claims and offensive statements. Membership in the professional organizations creating and supporting the codes is voluntary, as is adherence to the code. Even though it does have its problems, the industry believes that self regulation is preferable to government censorship.

**INTERNAL CONTROLS**

Most media organizations, in addition to following their own industry codes of conduct, have also established their own internal self-regulatory guidelines.

**Organizational Policy: Television Networks’ Standards and Practices**
For years, networks maintained large “Standards and Practices” departments whose staff would make thousands of decisions on the acceptability of dialog, plot lines, and visual portrayals. But since network cutbacks begun in the 1980s, these departments are smaller. Standards departments at Fox, NBC, and ABC still review everything their networks air, including commercials. At CBS, standards reviews children's programs, docudramas, ads, new shows, and a handful of existing shows. Monitoring varies widely across the cable networks. Increasingly, the networks have begun to rely on program producers to generally follow the accepted guidelines of good taste and decorum. Networks’ standards and practices departments do exercise some caution. However, the Internet can provide an outlet for material deemed inappropriate for broadcast TV. In addition, local stations can self regulate, and may choose not to air a network show (or to air it at a later time).

Most local stations also have what is known as a policy book, which typically spells out the station’s philosophy and operations standards on what practices are encouraged and which are not.

**Organizational Policy: Newspapers and Magazines**

Newspapers and magazines have policy statements that take two distinct forms:

- *operating policies* cover the everyday problems and situations found in a paper such as freebies, deceptive practices, junkets, checkbook journalism, and outside jobs
- *editorial policies* are guidelines the paper follows to persuade the public on certain issues or to achieve specific goals

One problem that crops up from time to time is called *boosterism*, which is a pro-community philosophy that can cause not-so-good news to go unreported.

The intelligent news consumer should seek out several different media to get a more complete view.

**Self-Criticism**

Historically, self-industry criticism within the media is the exception rather than the rule. Several journalism reviews regularly criticize media performance. The Internet has opened up a new channel for media self-criticism. A few papers have tried using an ombudsperson (someone assigned to independently handle and report on reader complaints about the paper), but the concept has yet to catch on.

**Professional Self-Regulation in Advertising**

The National Advertising Review Council was set up to sustain high standards of truth and accuracy in advertising. It is composed of two divisions. The first division, the National
Advertising Division, handles complaints about advertisements from both consumers and competitors. If the complaint cannot be resolved on this level, it’s then submitted to the National Advertising Review Board for appeal. If nothing works at this level the complaint can be forwarded to the Federal Trade Commission, though this occurs rarely. Industry groups also exert control over advertising for their products.

OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

The economic, political, and social environments that a media organization can sometimes find itself surrounded by can also have an influence on media performance.

Economic Pressures

In commercial media, the loss, or threat of loss, of revenue can be an important consideration in controlling what gets filmed, published, or broadcast, and economic controls can come in many forms.

Pressure from Advertisers. Advertisers can have some limited influence on film content via product placement. Newspapers, however, depend on advertising for 75% of their revenue. Magazines derive 50% of their revenue from ads. Radio and TV depend on ads for almost all of their income. The actual amount of control that an advertiser has over media content and behavior is difficult to determine. Most news stories, and most TV and radio programs, are probably put together without much thought as to what advertisers will say about them. However, examples of advertiser pressure do exist.

Business Policies. Economic pressure on media content can be encouraged by business practices. Trading news coverage for advertising time or space is a common problem, and much of the problem lies in the fact that the “trade” is often invisible to the media consumer. The issue of revenue-related reading matter crops up when businesses get more coverage than may be justified, in return for advertising revenue.

Pressure Groups

Various audience segments can band together and try to exert pressure on the media in economic ways (boycotts), or through bad publicity, or even through legal pressures (civil suits or attempts to revoke licenses). One of the most famous and successful groups has been the Action for Children’s Television (ACT) group, which disbanded in 1992. There are both positive and negative aspects to the activities of citizens groups. On one hand, they can encourage the media to be more responsive to community needs and disadvantaged groups. On the other hand, we need to remember that these groups are the self-appointed guardians of some special interest, not elected by anyone, and whose ideas may not be representative of the larger population. In extreme cases, they may actually abuse their influence and do more harm than good.
Press Councils

A press council (or news council) is an independent agency whose job it is to monitor the performance of the media on a day-to-day basis, somewhat like a group-oriented ombudsperson. But press councils have no enforcement powers other than the bad publicity a negative report might engender. The idea of press councils, which began in Europe, has not become very popular in the United States.

Education

Teaching ethical media practices in the nation’s universities is increasingly popular, and may have a direct though long-term impact on future media performance. Most experts in this area agree that instead of teaching specific codes of ethics to students, a systematic way of thinking about ethics should be stressed, so that individuals can consider issues and arrive at decisions rationally.

- End of Chapter 17 --