13. Design Ethics

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Definition and Background

Design ethics refers to practical standards that professional designers follow, such as copyright law, conflict of interest policies, licensing and legal protections, and federal regulations surrounding accessibility. Design organizations across the world publish codes or guidelines outlining ethical conduct for professional designers (Perkins, 2006). Yet, ethical design entails much more than following rules. It is the result of negotiating complex networks of human and non-human actors, as well as acknowledging systems of inequality and oppression, both internal and external to the design profession. In this more capacious definition of design ethics, we find a mindset that searches for implications beyond those that typically surface in institution- or client-driven orientations.

In creating an ethical design, designers and communicators are accountable to the larger social, environmental, political, and economic contexts in which the design will circulate, and they consider the potential consequences of what they create. As Nick Monteiro (2017) put it, "Asking ourselves why we are making something is an infinitely better question than asking ourselves whether we *can* make it." Ethical design practices may address a range of intersecting ***social justice*** issues, such as the future of the planet (Chan, 2018), human rights (Harihareswara, 2015), racial justice (Benjamin, 2019), gender diversity (Edenfield, 2019), labor hierarchies (Suchman, 1995), disability (Hamraie, 2013), or intercultural differences (Sun, 2012). Approaches such as ***participatory design***, ***user-centered design***, ***social design***, inclusive design, sustainable design, and feminist design overlap with design ethics. Technical communication scholars have explored design ethics in varied contexts; document design, in particular, has provided a rich site for inquiry about power relations and the designer's ethical responsibility (Dragga, 1996; Edenfield, 2019; Herrington, 1995; Jarrett et al., 2014).

The need for ethics in design may seem obvious. As Ashanka Kumari notes in her entry on ***equity***, today's design thinkers readily acknowledge that the made-world reflects biases, power, and privilege. However, many working in industrial and graphic design when these were nascent fields in the 1950s and 1960s actively ignored social contexts and presumed objectivity and neutrality in their work. The deeper ethical concerns that fuel design activism and advocacy today arose from social movements in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, which brought awareness to major global challenges. Writing about this period, Clive Dilnot (1984) observed a shift in the design profession's approach to ethics—a move from looking inward

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towards the client and the profession to looking outward, towards "the wider social world that produces the determining circumstances within which designers work" (p. 244). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, designers continued to consider diverse audiences and interests that were not purely (at least on the surface) commercial. In 1994 for example, Katherine McCoy invoked design as a form of activism: "We cannot be passive anymore. Designers must be good citizens and participate in the shaping of our environment" (p. 212).

In conceptualizing "design ethics" as social responsibility and not just professional responsibility, this chapter emphasizes ***inclusion*** and commitment to the public good as critical values in user research, design, and decision-making. For this reason, design thinking is sometimes viewed as an ethical approach to design because of the focus on real-world situations, empathy, and diverse stakeholders. However, a design ethics lens may reveal problems with "design thinking" itself. For instance, Lilly Irani (2018) has argued that the embrace of design thinking in North America is characterized by exclusionary, market-oriented labor hierarchies, as well as racialized and gendered definitions of what counts as "technology" and "expertise." The concept of ***empathy***, the first phase in the design thinking process, also has potential to serve exploitative capitalist production and exacerbate asymmetries of power. As the anthropologist and user researcher Sekai Farai (2020) cautions, colonial desire for domination may filter into design thinking and commercial design industries more broadly through the "trojan horse" of empathy. Designers and user researchers who identify with overrepresented groups and who separate themselves from users (rather than form relationships and coalitions) struggle with empathetic practice. Design ethics requires those with privilege to practice radical self-awareness and develop empathy over time and with intention (Farai, 2020).

Design Application

Design ethics offers a framework for thinking through design choices from at least two vantage points—first as practitioners or makers, and second as consumers or users. For example, flawed ballot design in the United States has significant impact on election outcomes, with greater harm done to poor, elderly, and disabled voters (Chisnell, 2016; Norden et al., 2012). From the perspective of ballot designers, they must account for diverse users and uphold their responsibility to the integrity of democratic processes. From the perspective of users (voters), they are presented with an opportunity to critically analyze ballot design, as so many Americans did in the five weeks following the 2000 Gore-Bush presidential election, when confusing ballots in Florida "likely caused more than 2,000 Democratic voters to mistakenly vote for Pat Buchanan" (Norden et al., 2012, p. 21). Similarly, widespread media coverage of Facebook's handling of misinformation and malicious political advertisements during the 2016 presidential election sparked debates about social media platforms' role in facilitating (or weakening) democracy through the design of interfaces and algorithms (Phillips, 2018).

In addition to caring about the public good, putting design ethics into practice also hinges on inclusion. Through inclusive design, the line between expert "designer" and non-expert "user" collapses. Kat Holmes (2018) argued that we must see excluded groups as experts and co-designers; their experience is their strength (pp. 56-57). As an example of this subversion, Avery Edenfield (2019) researched queer approaches to the design of sexual consent information. He demonstrated how "marginalized communities create, communicate, and educate each other" through zines, photocopied flyers, and other forms of "extra-institutional and tactical technical communication" (pp. 4, 10). Here is an example of ethical design: Community-led practices resulted in better outcomes for people who are not part of the dominant group, a conclusion that Sasha Costanza-Chock (2020) reiterates through her influential design justice framework (which also offers many examples of ethical design).

Through these and related approaches, designers are better positioned to work towards collective justice and avoid doing harm. They continuously consider what groups of people *might be left out*, what values or biases *might be operating* more or less visibly, and what relations *will most likely be shaped* between the communicator and the audience as a result of what they make or how they conduct user research.

Pedagogical Integration

Instructors may ask students to weigh considerations of purpose and audience across a range of design projects. Students may develop and plan their communication goals in pre-design proposals, as well as reflect on and articulate their rhetorical situation and choices in post-design narratives. These types of written assignments lead to questions about ethical implications: how the students' designs may have both intended and unintended effects, and how they might foresee and avoid inflicting harm with their designs. Beyond simply outlining purpose and audience, a focus on design ethics in pre- and post-design writing may lead to challenging, productive lines of inquiry—perhaps even more valuable for assessment and learning than the final product.

Students may also structure written reflection focused on design ethics through questions about relations and effects, such as those Anne Wysocki and Dennis Lynch (2012) offered in their textbook *Compose, Design, Advocate*:

- "What do you want the world to be? How do we live together well?" (p. 284)
- "Whose lives are not being considered?" (p. 284)
- "Is the project you are considering worthwhile? Will it have real effects through helping others?" (p. 288)
- "What strategies will best help you establish the relations you seek with your audiences and . . . others affected by the problem?" (p. 288)

Although Wysocki and Lynch write within the context of rhetoric and advocacy, these questions apply to many types of technical and professional

communication assignments and scenarios. In reviewing current pedagogical approaches to design ethics, Debra Lilley and Vicky A. Lofthouse (2009) have found teaching strategies such as role-play, case studies, and group discussions to be common practices in the classroom. Applied to these strategies, the questions above could prompt students to acknowledge different interest parties and how intersectionality complicates and enriches their design process.

Students could also use or modify the Wysocki and Lynch questions to analyze the ethics of a design that someone else (e.g., a professional designer or a classmate) created. Zarah C. Moeggenberg's entry on ***inclusion*** establishes the need for designers to engage dynamic, multidimensional perspectives. This work is difficult but necessary for anyone pursuing ***equity*** in design.

Constantly asking "who or what is being excluded?"—from both the design team *and* the design itself—unearths ethical shortcomings. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the website for crowdsourced design campaign "STAY SANE/STAY SAFE" (2020) featured countless posters imploring viewers to "stay home." Using the Wysocki and Lynch questions above, students might analyze these posters and ask whose lives are *not* being considered: Unhoused people are excluded from this design, as are victims of domestic violence and abuse (to name just a few out of many possible ethical considerations to explore). The campaign does harm by exacerbating the otherness and trauma that displaced and abused people already experience. Following this analysis, students could design their own poster to demonstrate principles of ethical design and address/repair injustice in the context of public health.

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