

PROPOSAL TO ESTABLISH A
COMMUNICATION ETHICS COMMISSION
IN THE
SPEECH COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION

Submitted to the
SCA Administrative Committee

Submitted by

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On behalf of over 130 petitioners, I request the approval of the SCA Administrative Committee to establish a Communication Ethics Commission in SCA. If approved, I ask that this proposal be forwarded to the Legislative Council for action at the 1984 SCA convention in Chicago. Our case is presented below with a brief review of actions taken to date, followed by additional rationale.

1. SCA officers were contacted, both informally and formally. Kenneth Andersen, then President of SCA, was contacted, along with William Work, Executive Secretary of SCA. A letter was sent to the national office in September, 1983, expressing an interest in initiating the process of establishing a commission. We were advised to make a public announcement and to seek the support of SCA members. We did so. Two announcements appeared in SPECTRA (February, 1984 and August, 1984). Numerous communications were exchanged and petitions were circulated. Over 130 signatures have been obtained thus far and over 20 letters of support have been received. This indicates that there are many members of SCA who would like to see a Communication Ethics Commission established in SCA. A list of names of supporters, signed petitions, and letters are included in Appendix A.

2. The major need which has been expressed by most persons is the need for SCA to provide the opportunity for members of like interests in communication ethics to organize. The organization of a commission would legitimize the group; would make it possible for members to meet on an on-going basis; would make it possible for coordinated, serious study to be advanced in the discipline. Many supporters have noted that the approach to the study of communication ethics is "haphazard." Such an approach works in opposition to careful, methodical, in-depth analysis. Our supporters feel that, like any other area of our field, serious academic study would be enhanced by organizing and coordinating our efforts. The usual functions of an SCA commission would take place: election of officers; development of convention programs; investigation of possible research projects; improvement of teaching methodology; and possible public comment about ethics in various public communicative situations.

Members of a Communication Ethics Commission would not discourage the study of ethics in other bodies of SCA (divisions, sections, boards, commissions, committees). Indeed, it is likely that we would collaborate with them in co-sponsoring programs, research projects and the like. Our members would belong to various existing areas in the association, of course. It has become clear to us, however, that the study of communication ethics transcends existing divisions, sections, boards, commissions, and committees of SCA (Article IX, Section 2, "Boards, Commissions, and Committees" of the SCA Constitution).

This point was partially addressed in a statement of support from Professor Richard L. Johannesen: "I support the need for this commission as a person who was one of the earliest members of the Committee (later Commission) on Freedom of Speech and who is a past Chair of the Committee on Accountability and Responsibility in Governmental Communication (now Commission on Governmental Communication).

The SCA 'Credo for Free and Responsible Communication in a Democratic Society' clearly takes the position that issues of free speech and of ethical communication are equally significant concerns of our association. For some twenty years the association's free speech committee/commission successfully has led the fight to raise membership consciousness, promote instructional programs, and safeguard individual rights concerning freedom of expression. Unfortunately, comparable association emphasis has not been given in a focused yet inclusive manner to the ethics of communication.

The association does have the Commission on Governmental Communication. However, its focus is on governmental (admittedly a vital concern), but not on human communication in general. And even its name change from the Committee on Accountability and Responsibility in Governmental Communication seems to mark lessened stress on ethical issues. There is a need for an SCA commission that will explore ethical issues across a broad range of communication types (interpersonal, small group, public speaking, mass mediated) and across a broad range of settings (social relationships, organizations, political campaigning, protest movements, intercultural contacts, advertising, etc.)."

3. The philosophical justification for the study of communication ethics is well-rooted in the speech communication discipline. Ethics is central to our field and has been an indispensable part of our tradition since our beginnings. As Professor J. Michael Sproule wrote in a letter of support, "Regarding a rationale for such a commission, I can think of no better way of putting the point than did Aristotle when he wrote that 'It thus appears that rhetoric is an offshoot of dialectic and also of ethical studies' (Rhetoric, I. 2. 1356a25). Explicit attention to this conception of rhetoric is appropriate within the organizational structure of the SCA, unless we want to subscribe to other philosophies of communication that do not treat the effects of messages within a framework of truth and moral obligation."

The search for truth, truthfulness in communication, and the moral obligations of speakers, listeners, third persons, and society as a whole are concerns of scholars in communication. However, events in contemporary society have presented a real threat to confidence in "the word." Levels of confidence have dropped to serious lows. The tendency to accept lies and deception as the norm in parts of our society is increasing. Yet truthfulness must be the norm for communication to exist and for society to survive. This includes private and public settings across the entire spectrum of our discipline: interpersonal, business and professional, organizational, mediated and mass communication, political and intercultural communication, and other specialized areas.

On the other hand, it is not easy to always know what is "the right thing to say" in complex communicative situations. Quick answers, moral slogans, seat-of-the-pants bromides, and narrow-minded exhortations of zealots do not serve us well. A serious, scholarly, research-based study of the issues is necessary in our field. Kenneth Andersen, then President of SCA, expanded on this point in a letter of support written in the Fall of 1983. Professor Andersen said: "With regard to the Commission on ethics. I think the focus should be on the ethical considerations of theory as much or more than practice in communication. I believe that ethical issues are prominent in the very act of formulation of a theory of communication. There are, of course, many practical concerns as well. It is not enough to understand that ethics play a role, to have some notion of the philosophical issues and foundations of ethics, but we need to have practical help in translating these into our everyday communi-

cation behaviors. There is a rich field involving responsibilities of the listener, the society and culture, as well as the speaker. I would like for the Commission to stake out the ethical issues and then the various areas and ways in which those issues are manifested could follow naturally. But the Commission should focus upon the core term of ethics and take that core where it may lead."

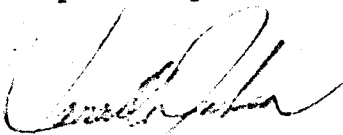
Theoretical principles, analysis of real-life situations, and the development of teaching methodologies are needed in communication ethics. A Communication Ethics Commission could help to accomplish those tasks.

4. Arguments for the need to advance the study of communication ethics have been presented by three past presidents of SCA in their presidential addresses. Robert Jeffrey (1973), Frank E. X. Dance (1982), and Kenneth Andersen (1983) have underscored the significance of ethical issues and ethical standards in human communication and have provided significant leadership in promoting communication ethics in SCA. As Professor Johannesen pointed out in his statement of support: "The time is ripe for our association to answer their calls by formalizing our commitment to teaching, research, and public advocacy on matters of ethical communication. Certainly creation of a Communication Ethics Commission would formalize that commitment."

5. The following information is included in the appendices: (A) A list of names of colleagues who have signed petitions in support of an SCA Communication Ethics Commission; (B) the original copies of the signed petitions; and, (C) a record of correspondence with officers and members of SCA.

In closing, I wish to express appreciation for officers and members of SCA for the work which they have done in behalf of the establishment of this proposed commission. Their enthusiasm, cooperation, and energy provide evidence that there is strong support and a deeply felt need for a Communication Ethics Commission. In addition, I wish to acknowledge the support of Dr. Richard Dieker, Chair of the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences at Western Michigan University, who provided departmental funds for mailing costs incurred in this project. We hope that the Administrative Committee and Legislative Council of SCA agree that there is a need and approve our request to form a Communication Ethics Commission in SCA.

Respectfully submitted,



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