

Call for Papers

Media and Moral Understanding

A Special Issue of the *Journal of Media Psychology*

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The invention of motion pictures in the late 19th century produced one of the most visible and powerful modern art forms. Mediated screen stories have become ubiquitous in contemporary culture, and content creators have discovered powerful ways to direct the viewer's attention and elicit impactful responses. Thus it is important to understand this great artform and its relationship to viewer knowledge and understanding. Can these mediated stories on screens have the salutary effect of increasing viewers' moral understanding? Which media, what *sorts* of media, and what *techniques* and *forms* used in media, are most effective in encouraging moral learning and understanding? This special issue is designed to feature theoretical and empirical work investigating the role media plays in the development of viewers' moral understanding.

Media and Moral Understanding

At a time when the art of narrative film and media streaming services occupy a central place in contemporary culture, it is vital to ask questions about the role mediated narratives play in the development of viewers' moral lives. To do so, we ask how media is related to viewer *moral understanding*. We define moral understanding as a deep set of normative inferences. These inferences support viewers' ability to ask pertinent moral questions, they help viewers understand *why* in addition to knowing *that*, they assist in categorization of situations and behaviors, and they help viewers make connections among morally-charged situations that have common underlying meaning. Moral understanding begins with our personal responsibilities and integrity, but extends outward with implications for all of the key social and political issues of the day. Moral understanding is not limited to matters of personal morality such as kindness,

loyalty, and betrayal, important as those are. It also extends to concerns for justice, fairness, liberty, and oppression in the broader cultural context.

- Can *Dead Man Walking* (1995) further our understanding of the moral implications of the death penalty? If so, does it do so in relation to the viewer's engagement with convicted murderer Mathew Poncelet and/or his benefactor Sister Helen Prejean?
- Can *Do the Right Thing* (1989) or *The Help* (2011) increase our understanding of racism and its implications – and how do the prior experiences with this issue impact how different viewers read these texts and reflect upon them?
- Do post-viewing discussions or reflections on the films deepen our understanding?
- Can *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* teach us something about the nature of romantic relationships and our obligations to our partners?
- Can *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) increase our understanding of the nature of loyalty, sacrifice, and courage in a wartime context?
- By extension, are viewers most influenced by characters they admire, such as Captain John Miller (Tom Hanks) in *Saving Private Ryan*, or can moral learning occur through oppositional stances to antagonists, for example, the oppositional stance viewers are meant toward David Duke (Topher Grace) in *BlacKkKlansman*?
- Do characters that engage in morally ambiguous behavior, elicit more post-film reflection than conventionally “good” characters?
- Do narratives reflecting moral issues such as *Just Mercy* and *The Hate U Give* impact moral understanding in similar ways as evocative documentaries like *13th*, or do the forms and structures of these films impact their effects?

Although these research questions can be fundamental to understanding the relationship between media and moral understanding, conceptual confusion and lack of clear definition and measurement has obfuscated results and understanding across disciplinary subfields. Thus, parallel and often isolated lines of work on media and moral understanding are occurring in multiple subfields bounded by disciplinary silos. Therefore, this special issue solicits papers addressing these questions from multiple disciplinary perspectives and approaches. We are interested in the interaction between media and moral understanding from a wide variety of perspectives, and hope authors will be up to the challenge of explaining their perspective for readers outside their own academic domain. We realize interdisciplinary work can be difficult to assess, which is why our editorial team draws from scholars in communication, philosophy of film, film theory, media psychology and cognitive psychology.

Example topics that would be of interest to the editor team:

- What is the role of the viewer's engagement with fictional characters in generating moral understanding? What behaviors, traits, and content cues impact how characters are perceived as moral/immoral and morally ambiguous? Broadly, what sorts of engagement with characters generate moral understanding?
- Can we construct a critical framework for engaging with media that shapes our moral experience? What moral value is there in understanding viewer responses? Should creators take viewer or fan response into account when incorporating moral dilemmas in narrative or other art? How do creative approaches to screenwriting shape moral dilemmas produced in television and film?
- What do the disciplines of media psychology, film and media studies, literary studies, cognitive neuroscience, and philosophical aesthetics have to teach each other about these issues? How can we foster interdisciplinary cooperation in research about the relationship between character engagement, post-viewing reflection, and moral understanding?
- What tools and methods can we use to examine morally-laden content to examine patterns in morality on screen and its subsequent effects on audiences? How do immersive and interactive media encourage moral thinking and moral decision making among users? What can database approaches, experimental work, artificial intelligence, or computational modeling contribute to the study of morality and media?
- What cognitions and judgements contribute to moral evaluations of media content? How does theory of mind relate to moral understanding? Where do perspective

taking and identification fit in our frameworks of morality and media? What role do emotions and affective states play in media appraisals of morality/immorality (e.g., disgust, humor & satire, etc)?

- How do the social ties and networks of characters and users impact their thinking on moral topics? What are shifting norms in media and how does the portrayal of norms in media content affect viewers? How does the culture in which media are created affect the presentation of moral issues in text or on screen, and how can we interpret culturally-bound texts intended for disparate audiences?

Criteria for Selecting Manuscripts

Papers are welcome from all countries and cultures and with diverse methods, from large surveys to small qualitative studies and ethnographies

Timeline and Criteria for Sending Proposals

Preliminary proposals are due **November 15, 2022** for priority consideration, although proposals can be submitted on a rolling basis. Proposals should include a tentative title and a 300–500 word description of the proposed paper.

All abstracts must be sent to the Guest Editors via email. Please send to both

Allison Eden (edenalli@msu.edu) and

Carl Planting (cplantin@calvin.edu) when submitting.

Decisions about consideration in the special issue will be made by **December 15, 2022** with full papers due 6 months afterwards on **May 15, 2023**, for a target publication date in late 2023. Please note that approval of a proposal will not guarantee publication. All submitted full papers will be anonymously peer-reviewed and will follow the *Journal of Media Psychology*'s editorial process. Authors may be asked to review other papers for the special issue.

Manuscript Preparation and Submission

To submit a manuscript, please follow the manuscript submission guidelines as detailed under "Instructions to Authors" on the journal's website (<http://www.hgf.io/jmp>) and select the name of this special issue when submitting through JMP's editorial management system at

<http://www.editorialmanager.com/jmp>.

Address your cover letter to the special issue's Editor, and note in your cover letter that your manuscript is being submitted for consideration for publication in the special issue on "Media and Moral Understanding".

Any questions about proposals should be directed to the special issue Guest Editors: Allison Eden (edenalli@msu.edu) or Carl Plantinga (cplantin@calvin.edu).

Questions regarding editorial process should be sent to the Editor-in-Chief (nbowman@syr.edu).