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BP & Sombrero Meme Deepfakes: Revisiting the Ethics of Synthetic Media in the Age of AI

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Introduction

In an era defined by rapid advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI), the production and circulation of synthetic media[1] have become central concerns for scholars, educators, technical and professional communicators, and publics alike. Generative AI technologies now enable the creation of images and videos ranging from innocuous visual memes to highly realistic deepfakes—synthetic media depicting individuals doing or saying things they never did or said. These technological capabilities have created opportunities for creative expression and streamlined many aspects of communication. At the same time, they have also strained foundational principles of ethical communication, including truthfulness, accuracy, respect for persons, and accountability. The core ethical commitments that have guided Technical and Professional Communication (TPC) for decades remain relevant even as tools evolve, but they are increasingly tested in contexts where the boundaries between "real" and "synthetic" blur and where audiences struggle to distinguish objective evidence from fabricated content. This tension is not limited to malicious or deceptive uses of AI. Even in human-generated photography, the visual impact can trigger assumptions of artificiality, as seen in coverage of South African photographer Kyle Goetsch's night-sky and wildlife images that audiences initially mistook for AI-generated work—a reminder that perceptions of authenticity have become as ethically salient as the technologies themselves (Bantock & Cross, 2026). Such reactions reveal how expectations shaped by AI's visual aesthetics now influence viewers' interpretation of imagery.

However, recent high-profile examples show how AI-generated content can change public discussion. In U.S. political communication, a phenomenon called "slopaganda" has emerged—official social media posts that mix memes, tropes, and synthetic images to provoke reactions and sway perceptions. For instance, crude sombrero-meme deepfake videos showing prominent congressional leaders wearing Mexican stereotype imagery spread widely on social media during a government shutdown, drawing sharp criticism for its racist implications and misleading depiction (Walker, 2025). These clips, circulated by well-known political figures, used digitally altered visuals to shape a partisan narrative, exploiting cultural stereotypes and emotional responses rather than presenting information. The "sombrero memes" demonstrate how superficial humor and symbolic imagery can intersect with political influence to create content that is technically AI-generated yet ethically questionable in its respect for dignity and civic duty. Beyond political memes, heavily altered representations of real-world events pose

[1] For the purposes of this essay, we define synthetic media as any text, images, video, audio, and/or combination thereof, that is co-created or created by generative Artificial Intelligence (AI).

serious challenges to the public's understanding of reality. Recently, AI-altered images and videos have circulated around violent incidents, such as the Minneapolis shooting of Renée Good involving federal agents, fueling widespread misinformation that makes it harder to determine what really happened (Gilbert, 2026). These artificial visuals, often shared without clear signs of their inauthenticity, increase confusion and greatly hinder audiences' ability to interpret evidence.

Because *Xchanges* engages with emerging scholars who discuss technology's role in interdisciplinary communication, the Special 25th Anniversary Issue provides a timely opportunity to revisit scholarship at an especially fraught moment. McDonnell's (2015) article, *"The Ethics of Visual Rhetoric & Photo Manipulation,"* foreshadowed today's challenges with AI image generation, deepfakes, and automated text production because the ethical dilemma it outlines—how to represent reality responsibly under institutional pressure—has surfaced ferociously in today's communication environments. We call on technical communicators to take an active role in shaping communication practices in the context of emerging technologies, specifically AI. Our ethical responsibility has expanded, not diminished, in today's TPC environments. Rather than treating AI as a rupture in communication practices, we assert that it is simply the latest iteration of a longer history of representational mediation, in which practitioners' agency, roles, and responsibility have expanded.

Implementing an Ethical Approach

Using the case study of the 2010 BP oil spill, McDonnell argues that while visual rhetoric is an inherently powerful and unavoidable tool in technical and professional communication, its ethical use is more complex than simply distinguishing between honesty and deception. McDonnell's thesis is that ethical decision-making in visual communication must consider the mediated nature of images, the persuasive power of visuals, and the situational pressures communicators face. Despite this complexity, altering visuals in ways that distort reality ultimately violates core ethical principles.

She starts her argument by highlighting the persuasive power of visual rhetoric, noting that images—such as photographs, graphs, and technical illustrations—shape how audiences perceive and interpret information across different contexts. She emphasizes that visuals are never neutral representations of reality; rather, they are always shaped by technological and human choices such as framing, angles, and editing. This makes the idea of "truth" in images more complex because even unedited photos involve some level of selective representation. To explore these ethical issues, McDonnell examines BP's use of manipulated images after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The company changed photographs to show a more controlled and effective response effort, which initially appears to be a clear ethical violation. However, McDonnell complicates this view by considering the intense pressures from corporations, the public, and the media that influence decision-making. She asserts that ethical evaluation involves not only looking at the act of manipulation but also considering the rhetorical situation in which communicators operate.

McDonnell raises ethical questions about how to balance honesty and institutional image in public communications, particularly in cases of photo manipulation. McDonnell (2015) asks us to think: “Where do we draw the line in terms of reality mediation and persuasion?” (p. 5). And to help us better understand where these ethical boundaries lie, she guides readers through two ethical frameworks, deontology and consequentialism, that can be applied to BP's photo manipulation to determine whether BP’s actions were justified. We believe that these two frameworks can be useful for exploring AI-generated content and that additional frameworks, such as virtue ethics, are necessary for TPC practitioners and educators to navigate the specific complexities of AI-generated visual media.

Rather than locating the primary ethical problem of synthetic media in the technology itself, this article argues that the more significant concern lies in how humans choose to employ these tools. Artificial intelligence is increasingly invoked as an explanation—or even a justification—for questionable communication practices, allowing users to shift responsibility onto the technology. Such framing risks positioning AI as a scapegoat for unethical decisions while obscuring the fact that communicators remain the moral agents responsible for the messages they produce. Although recent scholarship has characterized AI as a communicative co-agent capable of shaping rhetorical outcomes, the presence of AI in the writing process does not diminish the human user's ethical accountability. AI may imitate language, generate persuasive content, and influence communicative products, but it does not possess moral agency. By definition, a tool cannot bear ethical responsibility in the same way as a human actor. Consequently, ethical evaluation of synthetic media should remain centered on the character, judgment, and intentions of the communicator who chooses how, when, and why to incorporate AI into communication practices.

This emphasis on human agency makes virtue ethics particularly well-suited to examining the ethical challenges posed by synthetic media. Unlike ethical frameworks that primarily evaluate actions according to rules or outcomes, virtue ethics asks what kind of person a communicator becomes through repeated habits and decisions. In the context of AI-assisted communication, this perspective encourages practitioners to move beyond viewing themselves as passive users of increasingly capable technologies and instead recognize themselves as moral actors whose choices shape both professional practice and public discourse. The widespread accessibility of synthetic media heightens the consequences of communicative decisions, making reflection on virtues such as honesty, integrity, prudence, accountability, and practical wisdom especially important. By cultivating these virtues through habitual practice, communicators can engage AI critically rather than unreflectively, ensuring that technological efficiency does not supersede ethical judgment. In this way, virtue ethics recenters the distinctly human capacities for reflection, deliberation, and moral responsibility that remain essential even as communication technologies become more sophisticated.

At the same time, virtue ethics should not be understood as the sole framework for evaluating AI-mediated communication. The ethical complexities introduced by synthetic

media benefit from multiple complementary perspectives. Deontological approaches illuminate the duties and professional obligations that communicators owe to audiences, while consequentialist perspectives highlight the broader social impacts and unintended harm that AI-enabled communication may produce. As scholars have argued in analyses of complex ethical failures, including McDonell's discussion of the BP oil spill, multifaceted ethical problems are best examined through multiple ethical lenses rather than a single framework. Nevertheless, virtue ethics provides a foundational orientation by insisting that ethical communication ultimately begins with the communicator's character.

Regardless of how advanced AI systems become, responsibility for their ethical use remains with the human beings who exercise judgment over their deployment. Indeed, Carradini (2024; 2025) emphasizes the necessity for technical communicators to document the historical moment, changes, and future directions of AI study and practice in TPC. Carradini emphasizes the importance of "marking this moment" (2024, p.194) and suggests that "we should think big when we think about AI - whether we are for, against, or neutral on the topic" (2025, p.7). At this moment, AI development is changing rapidly, creating new questions, fears, and opportunities. This is a key opportunity to reflect on responsible communication and the communicator's ethical stance.

Situating Virtue Ethics

While there have been different definitions of ethics in TPC (Markel, 1994; Ross, 2025), we find it most useful to understand how people can use ethics as a decision-making tool to make responsible decisions in their communications. We argue that virtue ethics in particular is a useful framework to guide ethical communicative practices in the age of AI. According to Aristotle, the moral use of rhetoric is rooted in virtues, which are character dispositions to behave in "good" ways. Aristotle writes, "virtues are necessarily a good; for those having them are well-off in regard to them, and virtues are productive of good things and matters of action" (Kennedy, 1991, p. 63). Further, Aristotle specifies that virtue (*areté),* intelligence (*phronesis),* and goodwill (*eunoia)* are all necessary for establishing the speaker's good character (*ethos*) (Herrick, 2021). Therefore, this virtue is necessary for establishing credibility as a rhetor, as well as for practicing morally good rhetoric. Without virtue, the speaker is dishonest and dishonorable.

Academics and practitioners engage in ethical communication practices when they reflect on their moral habits and values and examine how morality is "reflected in them" (Vallor, 2026, p. 24). This engagement with virtue ethics, or decision-making based on virtue, promotes a culture of responsibility in moral decision-making. Rather than focusing on universal rules or isolated decisions, virtue ethics illuminates how ethical decisions are formed over time in pursuit of virtue and emphasizes that repeated opportunities for action shape our character (Holmes, 2025). With the recognition that too much or too little of virtues is not wise in all situations, virtue ethics calls for people to look for "practical wisdom in between extremes" (Holmes, 2025, p. 87). For example, solely valuing limited virtues, such as expediency, causes harm and functions as a vice.

In his famous essay analyzing a technical memo from the Holocaust, Katz (1992) critiques how Aristotle's descriptions of deliberative rhetoric prioritized expediency as “the primary virtue” and that this narrow focus on expediency has promoted mass extermination and dehumanization (p.267). Complex and evolving ethical situations require additional ethical perspectives beyond an ethic of expediency to engage in humane decision-making.

The concept of virtue ethics from classical rhetoric has influenced the TPC community’s perspective on making rhetorical decisions that align with our values. Throughout TPC scholarship, virtue ethics has been applied to emerging technologies, such as analyzing digital rhetoric during times of change (Colton & Holmes, 2016) and promoting app design that challenges and prevents oppressive beauty standards (Wang & Gu, 2022). Virtue ethics promotes a shift in communication cultures by grounding the decision-making process in virtues such as honesty, patience, and goodwill. This is especially useful for a flexible and sustainable way to respond to complex and evolving ethical dilemmas across different TPC environments. In *Ethical Design Intelligence: The Virtuous Designer*, d’Anjou (2020) draws on Aristotle’s ethical philosophy of virtue to examine how designers across disciplines can consider how virtuous design practice can define moral responses to situations and develop individual responsibility for choices. Virtue design ethics examines the teleological nature of design and the meaning of happiness at the end of design practice. This existential inquiry helps designers and communicators make intentional, sustainable decisions by reflecting on their character amid constant social, political, and environmental change. In addition, the development of virtues within a community, such as a global technosocial virtue ethic in relation to AI challenges, has the potential to resonate with diverse people across cultures due to its flexibility in addressing evolving moral challenges (Vallor, 2016).

Considering our responsibility to engage in socially just communication, Holmes (2025) suggests that the TPC community can incorporate virtues from marginalized global cultures to promote collective care. For example, *Ubuntu,* a normative ethical approach used on the African continent, calls for interdependence, solidarity, and civic responsibility, centering the community and humanity as important in the pursuit of a good life (Walwema, 2025). To address the ethical challenges of AI technology, Walwema (2025) suggests that *ubuntu* can serve as a “mediating force” to redress marginalization by algorithms and restore justice (p. 196).

In our pursuit of the “good life,” we must identify virtues that we aspire to engage in as habits, which may include care, honesty, citizenry, equity, and justice. This virtue ethics thinking helps situate the self in society and reveal the dispositions of the technical communicator (Duffy et al., 2018). We understand that the field of technical communication reproduces and creates “problematic sites of injustice” (Walton et al., 2019, p. 1), and that social justice perspectives are necessary to legitimize and redefine the field of TPC (Jones, 2016; Savage, 2018; Walton et al., 2019). Indeed, as Jones (2016) posits, TPC work is not neutral or apolitical and has many values embedded in the work. We believe that virtue ethics frameworks help us build critical reflexivity, an

active and ongoing process of self-reflection and action, which is necessary to engage in a socially just communication practice (Agboka, 2025; Walton et al., 2019).

Applying Virtue Ethics

While McDonnell does not explicitly discuss virtue ethics in her article, we believe it is another useful framework for evaluating whether digitally altered media, whether produced with Photoshop or AI tools, is ethical. McDonnell discusses principles of honesty and public responsibility, which we consider virtues important in TPC. In her analysis of BP's photo manipulation, McDonnell broadens the ethical discussion beyond mere accuracy, drawing on scholarship that argues visuals should prioritize clear, informative content over aesthetic qualities. When decorative or persuasive elements hinder truthful representation, ethical limits are crossed. Ethical visual communication, therefore, involves balancing accuracy, audience impact, and rhetorical purpose. Thus, McDonnell concludes that BP's actions were unethical because they altered reality and misled audiences, violating principles of honesty and public responsibility. Although all visuals involve some form of mediation, intentional manipulation that distorts truth undermines ethical communication. Her final argument is that technical communicators must recognize their rhetorical power and stay accountable for how their visual choices influence audiences, especially when under pressure.

This is especially important in the age of AI. One challenge is the prevalence and influence of synthetic media that impact our public values, sometimes in insidious ways. Research into deepfakes shows that these highly realistic manipulations can influence beliefs and judgments even after audiences have been explicitly told that the material is fake. In controlled experiments, participants exposed to deepfake videos continued to respond to the content in their subsequent judgments—even when they knew the videos were AI-generated and marked as such. This illustrates cognitive persistence, in which visual realism influences belief in ways that go beyond rational correction, challenging the idea that transparency alone is enough to safeguard against deception (Clark & Lewandowsky, 2025). This study demonstrates that technological sophistication and psychological reactions to synthetic content present significant challenges for democratic communication and public trust. However, these challenges do not indicate a fundamental shift from traditional communication ethics. Indeed, they highlight the need to rearticulate and adapt enduring ethical communication virtues for the digital age of AI. The TPC community can use virtue ethics to establish shared values regarding the use of AI tools and generated media, such as honesty and accountability. This grounding in virtues can facilitate critical, intentional reflection on communication habits, aligning communicative choices with virtues.

For example, in political communication, such as the viral sombrero deepfake memes, communicators have a responsibility to consider how their communication reflects their character and moral habits. These AI-generated memes were created and circulated during the 2025 United States government shutdown to assert power and dominance during a time of ideological division. Memes showed multiple Democratic representatives, including Hakeem Jeffries and Chuck Schumer, with sombreros and

mustaches, accompanied by mariachi music. During this moment in the shutdown, Republican leaders claimed that Democrats were trying to fund healthcare for undocumented immigrants, which Democratic leaders denied (Walker, 2025). These memes mocked Democratic leaders and perpetuated racist caricatures and stereotypes about the Mexican-American community. The effects were inflammatory; the memes incited conservative supporters of the administration and alienated democrats, Mexican-Americans, and nonpartisan constituents. During a government shutdown, building consensus across party lines is necessary and involves some degree of unity among lawmakers. Considering the virtue of unity, these sombrero memes are unethical as they alienate the Mexican-American community and create further division across party lines. These memes also convey the communicator's character. With the goal of virtue ethics aimed at the pursuit of the “good life,” the communicative act of creating and distributing sombrero memes does not reflect habits that will lead to a “good life.” In a virtue ethics framework, these memes should not have been produced or distributed because they didn’t reflect well on the AI content creators.

Virtue ethics calls for us to reflect on our habits and values during decision-making, which we believe is an important ethical approach to synthetic media. We should consider what kind of character we want to reflect and intentionally pursue virtues, such as honesty, patience, justice, and care, in our everyday interactions with AI. This connection to virtues helps us approach ethical challenges with flexibility to respond to different situations in TPC. We are responsible in our pursuit of “the good life” to use AI in ways that align with our virtues.

Other Ethical Approaches

While virtue ethics has many benefits, scholars argue that it should not be the only framework for addressing ethical challenges because there are many benefits of combining multiple perspectives (Vallor, 2016; Colton & Holmes, 2018). Multiple ethical frameworks provoke us to reflect upon the nuances of different ethical situations and help us contextualize different ways that we can respond to complex ethical dilemmas. We believe that deontology and consequentialism, in addition to virtue ethics, can help us engage with synthetic media responsibly.

Deontology

Deontology is a normative approach to ethics that focuses on the ethical duty of an action, rather than its consequences. In other words, one’s actions must align with one’s ethical duty, and this alignment constitutes good decisions. This framework can be particularly useful when examining our responsibility as the TPC community to use AI ethically. Deontology has been used for hundreds of years as a guide for decision-making, often applied to religious duty and rationality during the European Enlightenment (Pihlaja, 2025). Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative holds that acting in accordance with universal ethical duties, regardless of consequences or personal desires, is necessary for moral action. In her analysis of BP’s actions in response to the

oil spill, McDonnell uses a deontological lens, focusing on duty, truthfulness, and respect for audiences, to argue that their manipulation of images was unethical because manipulating images with the purpose to deceive the public violates BP's moral responsibilities. In addition, McDonnell suggests that if photo manipulation were considered a universal law, there would be extensive social harm from the deceptive framing of truth. Therefore, BP's manipulation of images cannot be ethical because it cannot be justified as a universal law.

The development of AI guidelines, both regulatory and non-regulatory, can help center ethical decision-making with a deontological approach. On a functional level, guidelines prevent unethical action by defining what is acceptable and unacceptable in the use of AI. Creating AI guidelines also helps delineate common values within an organization and promotes accountability for members. Ethical guidelines are not a new practice in the TPC community, as many guidelines have been created to foster professional standards since the 1950s for organizations such as the Association of Technical Writers and Editors (TWE), the Society of Technical Communicators (STC), and the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW) (Malone, 2011). Before writing or implementing AI ethical guidelines, the TPC community should consider the practical challenges of guidelines, such as ease of implementation, scope of audience, delineation between non-binding ethics and legally enforceable laws, and applicability to real user situations (Panarese et al., 2025; Ryan & Stahl, 2021; Smuha, 2019). For guidelines to be useful with consistently evolving technology, TPC communicators need to create an actionable code and enable flexibility to engage with new knowledge (Holmes et al., 2022; Smuha, 2019).

It's important to note that developing AI guidelines is only a starting point for engaging responsibly with AI. Holmes et al. (2022) argue that developing a framework is "*necessary* but not *sufficient*" and requires further conversations and actions to promote ethics (p. 520). AI frameworks need to provide proactive foundational guidance for ethical actions, not just to prevent the community from unethical action, for this to be an effective intervention to address ethical issues of AI. In addition, the combination of other ethical approaches, such as creating organizational cultures grounded in virtue ethics, may be most effective to promote responsible decision-making with emerging AI technology.

Consequentialism

In contrast to deontology, consequentialism is a normative ethical approach that focuses on the consequences of an action. If an action results in a good outcome, then the action is justifiable and ethically acceptable. McDonnell is skeptical that the potential consequence of easing public pressure and promoting greater peace of mind was positive enough to justify BP's photo manipulation. Further complicating this scenario, McDonnell (2015) writes, "there is no way to truly and accurately deem such an objective good or right," suggesting that there are not many reasonable methods to evaluate BP's doctoring of images through a consequentialist lens (p.8). There would need to be an understanding of what is "good" to be able to apply consequentialism to a

scenario. McDonnell shows that even from a consequentialist standpoint, justifying deception is difficult because deciding what constitutes a "good" outcome is inherently subjective. The subjectivity in defining the quality of actions affects AI-related decision-making. The creators of the sombrero memes likely believed that they were doing a "good" because the development and distribution of the memes would influence lawmakers to end the government shutdown. However, popular public reaction demonstrated that the memes caused more harm than good. Clearly, there were competing conceptions of the ethical "good."

Let's imagine that we could define what "good" or "bad" consequences are. With the rapid evolution of technology, there are challenges in defining the potential consequences of AI. We already know some of the impacts of AI on our society. For example, AI can exacerbate racial, gender, and other biases throughout its design and use (Bender et al., 2021; Panarese et al., 2025). Large language models use large datasets and create "Stochastic Parrots," in which bias is reproduced and amplified without human accountability. We understand that this bias from synthetic media can disproportionately affect historically marginalized communities (Colón Vargas, 2025), and it would be irresponsible for TPC practitioners and educators to use AI tools without recognizing their potential harms. On the other hand, there are many positive opportunities for AI, such as reducing repetitive work, making it easier to find information, and supporting mental health through affective computing (Carradini, 2024; Yadav & Maini, 2025). Given the multitude of potential outcomes, the TPC community would need to hold space for multiple consequences and try to weigh the net benefits of an action while making decisions.

While we have an understanding of some of the possible benefits and harms of AI, it's impossible to fully understand the scope of the consequences of synthetic media to guide our decision-making through a consequentialist approach alone. One of the major concerns about AI technologies is the lack of understanding of how AI systems work, often likened to a "black box" (Katz, 2025; Siau & Wang, 2020). This "black box" is problematic because the AI system can evolve without human monitoring and produce information in ways humans do not understand, creating fear and eroding trust (Katz, 2025). This issue of the "black box" makes it difficult to use consequentialist frameworks in decision-making, as we do not fully understand the consequences. Considering these uncertain outcomes of AI, we believe that virtue ethics can provide a helpful framework to navigate rapid technological change and promote constructive decision-making. We can reflect upon the different possible consequences of AI, define the virtues that we aspire to embody, and develop responsible agency with synthetic media.

Affirming Our Professional Responsibility

Xchanges 25th special anniversary issue provides an opportunity to reimagine our professional responsibility, re-anchor ethical frameworks, and respond to contemporary challenges. Because AI technologies will continue to evolve, ethical considerations must evolve alongside them. The recommendations that follow are offered not as definitive solutions but as a framework for ongoing reflection and action, calling on

communicators to exercise their agency, rely on their moral compass, and intentionally shape ethical communication practices in an ever-changing technological landscape.

Given the rise of AI-enabled communication technologies, technical communicators today have more power and responsibility than ever. Therefore, TPC communicators must make intentional choices to do good and mitigate the harms of AI, promoting a culture of ethical responsibility. To ensure that AI is designed for the betterment of the community, TPC designers should promote inclusive technology design, particularly with minoritized groups who are often excluded from conversations (Colón Vargas, 2025) and with interdisciplinary stakeholders (Panarese et al., 2015). By seeking professional development to improve their AI literacy and understanding of bias, TPC practitioners are empowered to use AI responsibly in their roles (Zhang & Lee, 2025) and intentionally use AI in their practice to reflect on what is lost when using AI rather than human agents. Belance et al. (2024) propose that "practitioners should account for the dehumanization process derived from the automation of service" (p.164). It's important for TPC communicators to reject the notion of technology as a neutral force and recognize the value of individual and collective virtues that humanize communication in this era of technological growth.

Many argue that TPC educators are on the front lines of teaching AI literacy (Balart & Shryock, 2024; Gallagher et al., 2025; Getto et al., 2025; Raji et al., 2021; Tham, 2024; Usher et al., 2025). In the classroom, TPC educators should explore the use of AI, and text and image production to help students–and themselves–unpack their values and ethics. Pedagogically, this can include activities and assignments that support students' discovery not only of the tools but also to critically analyze the effects of the artifacts generated. And, during the assessment of student work, the central activity can fundamentally change from "Is the learner cheating by using AI?" to "What is the student learning by using AI, how are the learner's ethical values guiding their use of it, and how will the artifact produced affect its intended audiences?" Reflection, then, becomes a necessary part of activities and assignments to help students and educators uncover and articulate their own ethical systems and values—and consider the impact of their rhetorical choices co-created with AI on their audiences. For example, the sombrero meme could serve as a model of study and thus become a valuable pedagogical tool to help students unpack their own ethical values with respect to messaging and AI use.

We posit that this kind of pedagogical approach is best supported in writing programs that embrace virtue ethics, too. The central task now facing Writing Program Administrators (WPAs) is not implementing expanded plagiarism policies—though some would argue it is a key task—but rather, reframing AI use and its artifacts as a literacy that combines critical thinking about the tools with discussions and reflections about the learner's ethical frameworks and interpretations of its artifacts. In other words, WPAs should steer TPC instructors away from policing student work and toward pedagogies of AI literacy and conversations that emphasize ethical responsibilities, not just as users of the tools but as humans communicating with other humans.

Likewise, TPC educators in the disciplines now have the responsibility to help students consider ethics not just as an ancillary professional obligation understood through a case study, such as Volkswagen's 2015 "Dieselgate" (Hotten, 2015). Instead, TPC educators in the disciplines should infuse ethical inquiry into all writing activities. In the hegemonic discourse conventions of STEM disciplines, this is particularly important. Typically, "clear and concise" prose is emphasized, marginalizing English Language Learners who may turn to AI to generate their documents. However, this sends a message: the learner doesn't learn to compose "clear and concise prose" if they become over-reliant on AI tools, and it perpetuates hegemonic language power systems (Colón Vargas, 2025). TPC educators in this domain, then, face layered challenges regarding AI literacy, artifact production, and ethics. Virtue ethics provides a more nuanced, personal framework for STEM learners as they enter the discourses of their chosen field.

Ethical responsibility is a personal, intentional choice, and we will digress for a moment to share an anecdote that illustrates our point. One administrator at our institution often reflects on the proliferation of synthetic media in our workspace and states that "the human touch is so important," remembering that behind every technology, there needs to be people who govern its appropriate use, engage in critical thinking, and communicate compassionately. When she engages with technology, she thinks about how she can bring her humanity into the work and how her work has real consequences for students, for better or worse. This is an approach to TPC communication that models the importance of personal ethical reflection. We must consider how our communications, directly and indirectly, impact our local and global communities, and take action to ensure that our humanity is not lost amid technological advancement. This is a key takeaway of responsible TPC. We cannot lose our own ethical judgment as humans in times of change.

Ultimately, ethical communication cannot be delegated to technology. As synthetic media become increasingly integrated into TPC practice, the central ethical question is not whether AI is inherently good or bad, but whether communicators cultivate the character and practical wisdom needed to use these tools responsibly. By centering moral agency on the human communicator, virtue ethics reminds us that technologies may influence communication, but they do not absolve individuals of responsibility for the choices they make or the values those choices reflect. This perspective, in combination with other ethical frameworks, offers an important foundation for TPC's future. In practice, virtue ethics encourages communicators to cultivate habits of reflection, transparency, accountability, and discernment that foster thoughtful engagement with AI rather than uncritical adoption. In pedagogy, it shifts educational priorities beyond technical proficiency to include the cultivation of ethical judgment, preparing students to navigate emerging technologies with integrity and competence. For scholarship, a virtue ethics framework invites researchers to move beyond evaluating the capabilities or risks of AI systems alone and to examine how communicators develop, sustain, and enact virtuous practices in AI-mediated environments. As technologies continue to evolve, so too must our ethical frameworks. We need to engage in an enduring ethical orientation by grounding decision-making

within the character habits of those who design, deploy, and communicate with AI tools. In so doing, it offers not a static set of rules but a continuing call for technical communicators to exercise their agency intentionally to shape the future of AI-enabled communication in ways that advance both professional excellence and the public good.

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