

MANUAL FOR CODING MORAL DISENGAGEMENT

SOCIAL AND MORAL JUSTIFICATION

Harmful products and practices are made socially acceptable and sanctified by moral, social, and economic justifications. Here are some examples of justificatory arguments:

- Libertarian arguments: Smoking is an exercise of one's freedom of choice. Protection of democratic values.
- Curbing intrusive government. Need to fight the intrusion of Big Government into people's private lives.
- Economic benefits. Provides livelihood for tobacco farmers.
- Free trade and commerce. Protect the free enterprise system from unfair trade practice. Prohibitions impair the free enterprise system.
- Tobacco tax revenues support worthy social purposes.
- Protect the public and policy makers from faulty research.
- Constitutional protections. Restriction on advertising and promotional practices violate our constitutional rights.
- Using freedom of choice as justifications to curb the advertising materials for helping smokers quit the smoking habit. As an executive put it, ["We do not endorse positions which would take away the freedom of choice for smokers."](#)

Examples

Television Violence

To justify the use of gratuitous violence, the television industry assigned a high moral purpose to the taking of human life in the likeness of a national character building service. Modeling violent solutions to problems builds character, and establishes the measure of man.

- “The government wants kids to think there are values worth fighting for, and that’s basically what the leads on our show are doing.”
- “If people who break the society’s codes resist the law, we have to use violence to suppress them. In doing so we are in the mainstream of American morality.”

Gun Industry

Justified producing lethal automatic weapons as providing better self-defense against violence.

- “If the gun has more stopping power, it is a more effective weapon.”

Nestle Infant Formula

Nestle sold its infant formula to mothers in Africa, Latin America, and South Asia, on the claim that it would produce healthier babies than breast-feeding. It required the mothers to mix the powdered formula with local water which was heavily polluted. Because the formula is expensive, the mothers overdiluted the formula, which provided poor nutrition. They were infecting and starving their infants worldwide with Nestle’s products.

The company’s representatives charged that the worldwide boycott of Nestle’s products was a conspiracy of religious organizations and an attack on the free enterprise system. They tried to defend and morally justify its questionable marketing practice by referring to the freedom of production and marketing.

ADVANTAGEOUS COMPARISON

How products and organizational practices are viewed is colored by what they are compared against. By exploiting the contrast principle, harmful products and practices are made acceptable or even benign.

- Other products that are harmful (e.g. alcohol, unhealthy foods) are allowed to be marketed freely
- The benefits of the product or practices outweigh any possible harm they cause.

Examples

Gun Industry

- “Just like the fashion industry, the firearms industry likes to encourage new products to get people to buy its products.”

Television Industry

- “There is violence in Oedipus, Hamlet, and it permeates the bible.”
- “To examine violence where the end result is a dead body on television glosses over the point. This evades the culpability of a whole society which permits wars.”

Producers often excuse commercialization of violence by contrasting it with outrageous inhumanities, as though one form of human cruelty exonerates other forms.

EUPHEMISTIC LANGUAGE

Activities can take on different appearances, depending on what they are called. Euphemistic language is widely used to make harmful products and activities respectable and to reduce personal responsibility for it. Different varieties of language of nonresponsibility exist. One form relies on sanitizing language.

Examples

- The TV industry markets the most brutal form of human cruelty under the sanitized label “[action and adventure](#)” programming.
- The military verbally converts deaths of civilians to “[collateral damage.](#)”
- The tobacco industry masks cancer by sanitized medical verbiage.
- Lies by politicians become “[a different version of the facts.](#)”
- Here is the sanitizing ecospeak by the Bush administration: “[Healthy Forests](#)” represent initiatives favored by the timber industry. The “[Freedom Car](#)” powered by “[Freedom Fuel](#)” absolves auto makers of making near-term improvements in fuel economy. Rewriting the Clean Air Act that reduced the demand to upgrade polluting plants was dubbed “[Clear Skies.](#)” The governmental snooping law is labeled the “[Patriot Act.](#)” The tobacco industry talks about developing a “[safe cigarette.](#)”
- Social reformers also use language as a way of swaying the public. Protesters against Nestle called them “[baby killers](#)” and their practices as “[commerciogenic.](#)” Abortion prohibitionists call doctors who perform abortions as “[baby killers.](#)”

The agentless passive voice serves as another self-exonerative tool. The verbal circumlocutions create the appearance that reprehensible acts are the work of nameless forces rather than people. It is as though people are moved mechanically but are not really the agents of their own acts. The performer of the activities disappears. The specialized jargon of a legitimate enterprise is also misused to lend respectability to an illegitimate one. In the vocabulary of the Watergate transgressions criminal conspiracy became a “[game plan,](#)” and the conspirators were “[team players,](#)” like the best of sportsmen.

DISPLACEMENT OF RESPONSIBILITY

Displacement of responsibility operates by obscuring or minimizing personal accountability for the harm caused by an organization or social system. Under displaced responsibility, members view their actions as stemming from the dictates of authorities rather than being personally responsible for them. Because they are not the actual agent of their actions, they are spared self-condemning reactions. They are simply carrying out orders issued by others. Sometimes the responsibility is shifted to compelling social circumstances as when employees argue they should not be blamed for offering money to foreign officials if that's what is needed to do business in their society. In the sanctioning of harmful practices, responsibility is rarely assumed openly. Only obtuse authorities would leave themselves accusable of authorizing harmful practices. They usually invite and support them in insidious ways by surreptitious sanctioning systems for personal and social protection.

Authorities often act in ways that keep themselves intentionally uninformed. They do not search for negative evidence. Obvious questions that would reveal incriminating information remain unasked, so that officials do not find out what they do not want to know. Implicit agreements and insulating social arrangements are created that leave the higher echelons free from blame.

Examples

Television Industry

Producers of violent fare are quick to displace responsibility for violent events to other sources.

- “Television and motion pictures are fall guys for a sick society.”
- “Are kids from unstable environments triggered by television violence? Their not having parents is a more serious problem.”

Some producers attribute the violent excesses, to the characters they create. Ruthless individuals, or even peaceful folks, confronted with mortal jeopardy demand acts of violence. One of the more candid script writers discounted the asserted dramatic requirement for violence, as analogous to saying, “I never put cotton in a wagon that’s not prepared for cotton—but I never use anything but a cotton wagon.”

Gun Industry

An executive absolves the gun industry of responsibility for the criminal use of the lethal semiautomatic pistols they design and market. “We design weapons, not for the bad guys, but for the good guys. If criminals happen to get their hands on a gun it is not the manufacturer’s fault. The problem is, you can’t design a product and insure who is going to get it.”

A law suit for negligent marketing, and distribution practices, was won by New York City against gun manufacturers. They charged that the gun manufacturers oversupply stores in Southern states with lax gun laws, with knowledge that the weapons are bought and resold to juveniles and criminals in cities with tough gun laws.

Chemical Industry

The world’s worst industrial disaster happened in Bhopal, India when some 40 tons of methyl isocyanate gas escaped from the Union Carbide pesticide production plant. At least 7,000 people were killed, 10,000 seriously injured, 20,000 partially disabled, and 180,000 others affected in one way or another. Union Carbide’s main strategy was to displace responsibility by blaming the Indian government for its failure to effectively regulate the plant and for allowing people to live nearby. The communities existed before the Union Carbide plant opened. Union Carbide officials claimed that they did not apply a ‘double standard’ in safety regulation. In reality, the Bhopal plant had violated the company’s safety standards and operated in a way that would not have been tolerated in the United States. Although the safety systems are automated with a state-of-the-art computer system at Union Carbide’s plant in West

Virginia, many of the controls at the Bhopal plant were manually operated. The company displaced responsibility to the Indian government for requiring manual control whenever possible. Dow and Union Carbide both deny legal responsibility with Union Carbide refusing to appear before Indian courts.

DIFFUSION OF RESPONSIBILITY

Personal accountability is also weakened or obscured by diffusing responsibility. Personal accountability for one's contribution to harmful activities can be dispersed in three ways.

Group decision making is a common practice to reduce a sense of personal accountability for harmful practices. Social organizations go to great lengths to devise mechanisms for obscuring responsibility for decisions that will affect others adversely. A sense of responsibility can be diffused, and thereby diminished, by *division of labor*. Collective action is still another expedient for weakening moral control. Any harm done by a group can always be attributed largely to the behavior of others. Most enterprises require the services of many people, each performing subdivided jobs that seem harmless in themselves. After activities become routinized into detached subfunctions, people shift their attention from the morality of what they are doing to the operational details and efficiency of their specific job.

When everyone is allegedly responsible, no one really feels responsible. These are two ways in which nonresponsibility through displacement and diffusion of responsibility is revealed.

Social arrangements of mazy and diffused modes of authorization of harmful products, and social practices that permit personal deniability, i.e., I didn't authorize it. I didn't know the research evidence, I didn't know they were ignoring the safeguards.

Television Industry

Personal responsibility for gratuitous violence is obscured by diffusing responsibilities for the product. Diffusion of the production process reduces a sense of personal responsibility for the final product.

Rewriters alter writers' scripts. Directors fill in the details of the scenarios. Editors take a part in how filmed events are depicted by what they select from the lengthy footage.

Tobacco Industry

The responsibilities for the production, marketing and sale of tobacco products is widely diffused across a diverse set of social systems. The cast of moral disengagers is listed below:

Tobacco Executives: Disputing the view that nicotine is addictive and that smoking is a major contributor to lung cancer.

Chemists: Discovering ammonia as a means to increase the nicotine "kick" by speeding the body's absorption of nicotine.

Biotech Researchers: Genetically engineering a tobacco seed that doubles the addictive nicotine content of tobacco plants.

Advertisers: Targeting young age groups with merchandising and advertising schemes depicting smoking as a sign of youthful hipness, modernity, freedom and women's liberation.

Importers: A subsidiary of a major tobacco company engaging in an elaborate international cigarette smuggling operation to evade excise taxes.

Lawyers: Attorneys who defend harmful corporate practices and try to refute evidence of injurious effect.

Movie Actors: Agreeing to smoke in their movies for a hefty fee.

Trade Representatives: United States trade representatives threatening sanctions against countries that erect barriers against the importation of the U.S. cigarettes.

President Carter: The paragon of moral virtue, firing his head of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare for refusing to back off on the regulation of tobacco products.

Legislators: With bountiful tobacco campaign contributions by exempting nicotine from drug legislation even though it is the most addictive substance and passing preemption laws that block states from regulating tobacco products and their advertising.

Department of Agriculture: The Department essentially banning low-nicotine tobacco. Farmers are ineligible for government price supports if they grow low-nicotine varieties.

Drug Lords Connection: Tobacco companies ship loads of cigarettes to the small Caribbean island, Aruba. This is the distribution point for drug lords who launder their narcotics money in Swiss banks through cigarette sales. A company official absolves company of responsibility: “We sell to distributors. It’s not our business what they do with it.”

Opposition to Worldwide Smoking Initiatives: U.S. opposing a worldwide ban on cigarette advertising and sponsorship of entertainment and sports events, even with exemptions for countries with constitutional constraints.

MINIMIZING OR DISTORTING HARMFUL EFFECTS

Other ways of weakening moral control operate by minimizing, disregarding or even disputing the harmful effects of one's action. When people pursue activities that harm others, they avoid facing the harm they cause or minimize it. If minimization does not work, the evidence of harm can be discredited. As long as the harmful results of one's conduct are ignored, minimized, or disbelieved there is little reason for self-censure to be activated.

This is a central mechanism in corporate moral disengagement because producing products or engaging in practices that are known to injure or kill people would result in social censure and self-condemnation.

Examples

Television Industry

A self-protective way of escaping self-censure is to misrepresent, deny or ignore harmful effects.

Another common strategy is to argue that, because of the complicity and multicausation of human behavior, its causes can never be unraveled.

- “Violence is a catharsis for kids.”
- “Nobody has been able to make a definitive statement about the effects of televised violence.”
- “Exposure to properly presented conflict which results in violence acts as a therapeutic release for anger and self-hatred.”

The catharsis effect has long been discredited empirically. The results of a multitude of experimental, correlational, and controlled field studies document the adverse effects of exposure to televised violence.

Auto Industry

Placement of the gas tank in the Ford Pinto was such that it would rupture easily and explode when struck from the rear. Pinto crashes had caused at least 500 burn deaths. Ford engineers concluded that the safety problem of the Pinto could be solved by a minor technological adjustment. This would have cost only \$11 per car to prevent the gas tank from rupturing so easily.

Ford produced an intriguing and controversial cost-benefit analyses study to prove that this modification was not cost-effective to society. The study provided social justification for not making that option available to the customers.

Ford convinced itself that it was more cost effective to pay millions of dollars in Pinto jury trials and out-of-court settlements than to improve the safety of the model. By placing dollar values on human life and suffering Ford simply disregarded the consequences of its practice relating to safety of millions of customers.

Nestle

Companies may not close their eyes once their product is sold. They have a continuing responsibility to monitor the product's use, resale, and consumption to determine who is actually using the product and how they are using it. Post-marketing reviews are a necessary step in this process. In 1978 Nestle confessed that like other companies in the industry, they did no such research and did not know who actually used its products and the manner in which they did so. In this negligent attitude toward learning about the effects of its product, Nestle was acting on the strategy of disregarding the harmful consequences of its practice in developing countries. In 1984 Nestle's self-discrediting experience with the controversy over their infant formula finally came to an end by adopting the policy recommendations of WHO international marketing code.

Chemical Industry

Union Carbide was well aware of the hazardous nature of MIC, but went ahead with the design for the Bhopal plant that included three huge storage tanks for MIC, each with a capacity of 45 tons. Two years before the Bhopal disaster a three-member safety team from Union Carbide headquarters visited the Bhopal plant, and submitted a revealing report on the safety dangers of the MIC section. The report recommended various changes to reduce the hazardous risks at the plant but the recommendations were never implemented.

Aircraft Industry

An aircraft manufacturer produced a plane with defective fuel cells in the gas tank. After the first fatal crash the company knew it had a defective fuel tank. The test pilot recommended corrective action in an interoffice memorandum:

“A condition [exists] which is extremely dangerous, and corrective action should be taken immediately.... When making a rolling take-off, when the tanks are half full, the centrifugal force throws the gas to the outside of the tanks and the engine quits dead after the airplane is airborne. [The test pilot] has tried this several times and has found it to happen each and every time...

I submit the information for your help and recommendation. It looks to me like or Quality Control and/or Flight Department, when testing and checking these airplanes, are letting a lot of things through that certainly should not be.”

Nothing was done to correct the defect. The company decided to gamble, and act as though it was pilot error. 13 people died in fatal crashes.

ATTRIBUTION OF BLAME TO VICTIMS

Blaming the victim for bringing the suffering on themselves is another expedient that serves self-exonerative purposes. Attribution of blame should be distinguished from displacement of responsibility. In responsibility displacement, accountability for our actions is shifted to the persons giving the orders. They are not the decision makers or prescribers of the corporate practices. They are simply carrying out orders. In blame attribution, the victims of the products or the harmful practices are blamed for bringing the suffering on themselves. In short, responsibility displacement blames the chain of command; attribution of blame, blames the victim.

Examples

Tobacco Industry

The tobacco industry contends that their cigarette warning labels specify the health hazards. If individuals choose to smoke, it is their fault if they develop health problems.

Gun Industry

The mantra of the gun industry is that it is people not guns that kill. They are therefore to blame for killing each other.

Television Industry

Viewers have control over their television sets and what they choose to watch. Therefore, they have only themselves to blame if they are harmed by the content.

Chemical Industry

Union Carbide was allowed to locate its factory in the middle of Bhopal, just two miles from the Bhopal railway station. It was convenient for shipping, but proved to be disastrous for the people living nearby. For years, the plant has been ringed with shantytowns, mostly populated by squatters. All three of the worst-affected communities in the disaster apparently existed before the Union Carbide plant opened, but the people were blamed for living near the factory.

Auto Industry

Ford continuously claimed that the “Pinto is safe,” thus denying the risk of injurious consequences. Ford managers justified their claim by referring to the US safety regulation standards in effect until 1977. In doing so they displaced their responsibility for a car that caused hundreds of deaths to the driving practices of people, who would not have been seriously injured if their Ford Pinto had not been designed in a way that made it easily inflammable in a collision.

DEHUMANIZATION OF VICTIMS

The final set of disengagement practices operates on the recipients of detrimental practices. The strength of moral self-censure depends on how the perpetrators regard the people they mistreat. To perceive another as human activates empathetic reactions through a sense of common humanity. The joys and suffering of those with whom one identifies are more vicariously arousing than are those of strangers or those divested of human qualities. It is difficult to mistreat humanized persons without risking personal distress and self-condemnation. Self-censure for cruel conduct can be disengaged or blunted by stripping people of human qualities. Once dehumanized, they are no longer viewed as persons with feelings, hopes, and concerns but as subhuman objects. If dispossessing one's foes of humanness does not weaken self-censure, it can be eliminated by attributing demonic or bestial qualities to them.

Examples

Television Industry

Viewers are divested of human sensitivities or invested with base qualities that justify serving them gory offerings.

- “Not as much action as some, but sufficient to keep the average bloodthirsty viewer fairly happy.”
- “Man’s mind is connected to his stomach, his groin, and his fists. It doesn’t float five feet above his body. Violence, therefore, cannot be eradicated.”
- “Make the villain all bad and have the hero kill him to give the audience a sense of fulfillment.”

The prevalence of violent content is attributed to the aggressive nature and desire of its viewers.

In fact, there is no relationship between the level of program violence and the Nielson index of program popularity ($r = .05$). Situational comedies and variety shows are the big draws. The answer to the prevalence of violent scenarios on TV lies in production costs and other structural factors, not in human craving for cruelty.

Chemical Industry

Union Carbide refused to pay anything to the Indian victims and their families, whose impoverished status made them easy to dehumanize and disregard.