

## Jokes in public: The ethical implications of radio prank calls

*Digital communication has made international prank calls easier than they have ever been. This paper examines the ethics behind the practice of radio prank calls and their implications for mainstream journalism – applying a combination of Elliott and Ozar’s ‘systematic moral analysis’ and Kant’s principles of the categorical imperative and ends as means. This is done using three transnational cases of prank calls emanating from Australia, Spain and Canada with consequences ranging from the death of an innocent, vulnerable nurse working in a London hospital to the public embarrassment of a vice-presidential candidate in the United States. The study argues that while radio prank calls can contribute to the public sphere, they can also have unintended negative consequences that reflect badly not only on radio hosts but also on mainstream journalists.*

**Keywords:** prank calls, radio hosts, systematic moral analysis, Kant, ends as means, categorical imperative

The inception of digital media changed the ways radio programmes are produced and received across the world. Not only is access to programmes faster today, it has become easier for viewers to switch channels given their shorter attention spans (Agarwal and Barthel 2015). Radio producers are, therefore, constantly seeking innovative ways to package their shows (Purdey 2000). The communication revolution has led to a proliferation of media outlets that compete for both audiences and advertisers. As a result, radio and television rating points have become central in deciding the popularity of media outlets so that the advertisers can conveniently choose their target (Turner 2009). Increasing competition, together with the race for rating points, has pushed many television

channels and radio stations to make their programming sensational and attention-grabbing (Wang 2012).

These factors came to a head in 2012 when two Australian radio hosts prank-called a nurse in a London hospital leading to her suicide. The high-profile case generated a discussion on the ethics of prank calls and suggestions that a more equitable and participatory journalism is necessary when reporting on ‘victims’ and the vulnerable.

Social media also have had a significant effect on coverage of suicide. The suicide of actor Robin Williams in August 2014 resulted in coverage that revealed tensions between control of the media through regulatory systems and professional guidelines and the unregulated world of social media. Here, audiences can access content that the media, when contemplating publication, are required to consider with extreme caution for fear of inciting copycat behaviour amongst vulnerable people.

In prank calls designed to extract classified or personal information that cannot be obtained through conventional or legitimate routes, a radio host masquerades as someone else while tricking informants into revealing the classified information. Our ‘vulnerable’ population, in this study, are the victims of prank calls. By being tricked into providing information, they are rendered unable to protect themselves from harm or exploitation. The prank callers take this ability away when they trick them. Furthermore, as the case of the nurse shows, this population may have additional vulnerabilities that radio hosts should be aware of.

Pranks have been theorised as the use of humour in media ‘to stage an event that makes a social or political point, circulating it in the public sphere’ (McLeod 2011: 97). Author of *Gulliver’s Travels*, Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), who viewed pranks in this way, believed they made audiences more thoughtful, reflective and humane (McLeod 2011). On the other hand, the deception inherent in pranks has been compared to the use of physical force to manipulate someone into doing what the prankster wants (Bok 1978).

In the past, prank calls and other trick-based methods constituted humour or satire on radio and television as distinct from hard news. In recent decades, however, the genres have partially overlapped, leading to a blurring of boundaries between news and entertainment

(McBride and Rosenstiel 2013). A 2004 poll showed that growing numbers of 18 to 29-year-olds in the United States accessed their presidential campaign news from sources such as *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show* rather than from traditional news sources (Williams and Delli Carpini 2009). Scholars such as Gant (2007: 201) argued against adopting a narrow definition of journalism. He asserted that 'there may be journalists who make it their profession, but one need not be a professional journalist to practice journalism'.

An examination of radio talk show hosts reveals their roles as quasi-journalists. As the cases in this paper show, they adopt a journalistic format, using false personages to gain access to information about prominent people for the purpose of sharing that information with the wider public. The purpose of radio talk shows is as often to entertain as to inform, but this tabloid format parallels that of journalism. Therefore, there is a need to study the growing practice of prank calls because of its implications for mainstream journalism and ethics.

While there have been sporadic reflections in newspapers and the blogosphere on the practice of prank calls (e.g. *Ethics Alarms* 2012; Guangming 2012; Minnick 2011), the analytical perspective on the issue has been largely missing. Pearson (2015) adopted a Buddhist ethics approach to analyse the Australian prank call case, concluding that the prank call practice is inherently unethical and should be 'ruled out'.

This study, however, departs from Pearson's (ibid) conclusion to consider some unaddressed questions: At what point does the humorous engagement with the public sphere outweigh the potential harms of deception? What are the implications of entertainment-driven prank calls for legitimate journalism? While it is hard to answer these questions definitively, this study explores them through the analysis of three cases of radio prank calls originating in Australia, Canada and Spain. All three happen to cross national boundaries, adding a global dimension to the phenomenon of pranks. The study employs systematic moral analysis (SMA) and Kantianism, in particular the concepts of ends as means and the categorical imperative.

#### Case 1: The royal prank tragedy

The first case – which was also used in Pearson's (2015) study – is of Jacintha Saldanha, a nurse who worked at the King Edward VII's Hospital in London. She committed suicide following a call in which she was pranked. Forty-six-year-

old Saldanha worked in the United Kingdom for 10 years until her death in December 2012. The prank call that led to her death was made by two Australian radio hosts, Mel Greig and Michael Christian, from Sydney's 2Day FM station. The two radio jockeys were hosts of the *Hot30 Countdown* show and wanted to get information about the health of Kate Middleton, wife of the Duke of Cambridge Prince William, who was admitted for a pregnancy-related fever in the hospital where Saldanha worked.

In particular, the two Australian radio hosts wanted details of the Duchess of Cambridge's severe morning sickness. They pretended to be Queen Elizabeth and Prince Charles. Saldanha, who answered the call, fell for the prank and transferred them to a duty nurse who divulged intimate medical details about the Duchess. Afterwards, Saldanha was highly traumatised by the media coverage of the incident (Suroor 2012b). Saldanha was also frightened because she had violated the hospital rule that 'when the reception is closed for the night the duty nurse is only supposed to take down phone messages – and not transfer any calls' (ibid). Three days later, when it became clear to the public that Saldanha had been pranked, she committed suicide. Saldanha's role in the incident, which made headlines around the world, was telling the caller: 'Oh yes, just hold on ma'am' (Suroor 2012a).

The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge said they 'were looked after so wonderfully well at all times by everybody at the hospital and their thoughts and prayers [were] with Jacintha Saldanha's family, friends and colleagues at this very sad time' (ibid). Amidst the media furore and public demands to sack the two radio hosts, Greig and Christian were taken off the air. The station temporarily suspended all advertising, as advertisers, including Australia's largest supermarket chain, started pulling their advertisements. In the end, the owner of the 2Day FM station cancelled the *Hot30 Countdown* show and agreed to stop all prank calls. In an interview just after the call, Greig and Christian said: 'We were very surprised that our call was put through. We thought we'd be hung up on as soon as they heard our terrible accents. We're very sorry if we've caused any issues and we're glad to hear that Kate is doing well' (Hindu 2012).

Days after the death of Saldanha, the two radio hosts were apologetic when in a television interview Greig said: 'It came into my head that

I just wanted to reach out to them [the family], give them a big hug and say sorry' (AFP 2012). The 2Day FM station later claimed that it tried to reach King Edward VII Hospital management at least five times before airing the prank call – a claim which the hospital officials refuted (DPA 2012).

A preliminary investigation conducted by the Australian government media watchdog, Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), reported that the prank call 'broke the law' (BBC 2013) for breaching the NSW Surveillance Devices Act when the 2Day FM station aired the call in December of 2012 without consent (Christensen 2014). 2Day FM then approached the federal court to appeal against the finding. The station also wanted to prevent ACMA from finding whether the station 'committed criminal offence or was in breach of its license' (AAP 2013).

2Day FM argued that ACMA had acted as 'policeman, prosecutor, judge, jury, prison warden and parole officer' (Bibby 2014) and demanded that the court, and not a media regulator, conduct the investigation. The court handed down the judgment in favour of 2Day FM, overturning the watchdog finding that the station broke the law. The court also gave extended orders preventing ACMA's preliminary report from being published. The decisions were a setback to ACMA's investigation, and put an end to any possibility that the station might be subjected to tough penalties such as a total broadcast ban (ibid). The court ruling, however, did not prevent the watchdog from continuing to investigate whether the station 'breached the commercial radio code of practice' (Jackson 2014). The legal battle has yet to come to a close and the court rulings have stymied ACMA's probe into the prank call that led to Saldanha's death. In analysing the role of the prank call in the death of Saldanha, it is pertinent to note that she had a history of stress and depression (Johnson 2012). The 2Day FM station later donated 500,000 Australian dollars from its advertising profits to a memorial fund to help her family. Greig resigned from the radio station after she lodged a complaint against Southern Cross Austereo, the company owning 2Day FM, that it had 'failed to maintain a safe workplace' (Davidson 2013).

#### **Case 2: Sarah Palin pranked by Masked Avengers**

The second case is of a prank call made to 2008 American vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin by two radio jockeys from Montreal. The

Canadian radio duo comprising Marc-Antoine Audette and Sébastien Trudel is notorious for pranking Ban Ki-moon, Britney Spears, Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy. In all these cases, the duo put the public figures in an embarrassing spot. The radio comedians appear on the afternoon programme *Les cerveaux de l'info* (*The brains of the news*) on the CKOI-FM station and are also known as the Masked Avengers.

In Palin's case, the Masked Avengers posed as then-French President Nicholas Sarkozy to extract information from Palin on the vice-presidential campaign and foreign policy. During the six-minute conversation, Palin talked about hunting, relationships, family and politics. The high-point of the conversation was Palin's admission that she may run for president in eight years. The prank on 'one of the most heavily protected personalities in US politics' (Goldenberg 2008) went viral on the internet in the final hours of the presidential campaign. The transcript of the call was made available on the internet and the audio was uploaded on to YouTube.

Afterwards, in an interview with the Canadian press, Audette said it had taken five days to get clearance from Palin's communications team as well as the secret service for the phone call. When asked for the reason behind the prank, Audette said: 'I wanted to see how she [Palin] was on an intellectual level. You can see that she's, well, not really brilliant' (Goldenberg 2008).

#### **Case 3: Evo Morales pranked by Cope Radio**

The last case for analysis involves Evo Morales, who became the President of Bolivia in December 2005. Morales was pranked by David Miner, a comedian from Cope Radio which is a right-wing radio station owned by the Roman Catholic Church in Spain (Keeley 2005). The comedian appearing for the morning show impersonated José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, Spain's socialist Prime Minister. Miner congratulated Morales on his presidential victory and invited him to visit Madrid. The radio comedian also urged the newly-elected socialist president to join the left-wing syndicate involving Cuba, Venezuela and Spain. 'We are sincerely happy that you are triumphantly joining the new order that we wish to set up in Spain and Latin America, Evo,' said Miner (BBC 2005).

Unlike in Palin's case, the Spanish comedian never told Morales that he was pranked. Later, however, when Morales realised this was the

case, he called a press conference giving details about the telephone call. The Bolivian Embassy filed a formal complaint with the Spanish government, saying that the prank call had 'exceeded the limits of humour and offended the Bolivian people' (Keeley 2005).

The Spanish government was quick to respond to the incident and issued an apology. 'They [the Catholic Church] have arrogantly humiliated a Latin American nation, whom they look down upon from a position of supposed superiority. It is morally reproachable,' said Spain's justice minister (McLean 2005). Miguel Ángel Moratinos, Spain's foreign minister, also summoned the Vatican's envoy to demand an explanation about the remedial steps to prevent similar prank calls. Equally embarrassed by the prank call, Prime Minister Zapatero called Morales to apologise and to congratulate him on his election victory.

Before the elections, Morales advocated a socialist governance model and promised to nationalise Bolivia's gas sector. In fact, before the prank call incident, the Spanish government had made friendly overtures to Morales while trying to safeguard the interests of Spanish oil and gas companies in Bolivia (Crawford 2005). Given the situation, the prank call by Cope Radio amplified the Spanish government's embarrassment. The Catholic Church, meanwhile, had been critical of Zapatero's government and its policies such as the legalisation of gay marriages.

After the prank call was broadcast, the immediate reaction of Cope Radio was to dismiss the incident as 'just another joke' (Keeley 2005). But as pressure from the Bolivian and Spanish governments mounted, the radio station caved in with its board of directors acknowledging that the prank call 'had gone too far' (*Chicago Tribune* 2005). Cope Radio issued a statement which said: 'The board of this station wishes to clarify that it has never been its intention to lack respect for the president-elect of Bolivia, nor hinder the normal development of the international relations of our country' (Reuters 2005).

#### **Ethical analysis of radio prank calls: Kantianism and deception**

The ideas of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) have been used as a moral compass in different circumstances to resolve ethical dilemmas. For the current analysis, two Kantian concepts are central in terms of their aptness and applicability: (a) ends as means, and (b) the categori-

cal imperative. The concept of ends as means stems from the will, which, according to Kant (1956 [1785]: 95), can be found only in 'rational beings'. It is the end that serves as a subjective ground for the self-determination of the will. In comparison, means serve only as the ground of the possibility of an action whose consequence is an end. The concept of ends as means holds little value if it is applied to something whose existence in itself does not have an absolute value (for example, an inanimate object). Whereas, for rational beings including human beings – whose nature inherently makes them ends in themselves and hence beings to be revered – the concept acquires 'practical' value. Kant (ibid: 95) explains this as follows:

Now I say that man, and in general every rational being, exists as an end in himself, not merely as a means for arbitrary use by this or that will: he must in all his actions, whether they are directed to himself or to other rational beings, always be viewed at the same time as an end.

Kant (ibid: 96) further says:

Persons, therefore, are not merely subjective ends whose existence as an object of our actions has a value for us: they are objective ends – that is, things whose existence is in itself an end, and indeed an end such that in its place we can put no other end to which they should serve simply as means; for unless this is so, nothing at all of absolute value would be found anywhere.

This theorisation leads to the practical imperative or the final statement of the concept of ends as means which is applied to ethical analysis. It states: 'Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end' (ibid).

The concept of the categorical imperative is tied to Kant's (ibid) formula of ends as means in that it originates from human will or motivations, which is the bedrock of Kantian philosophy. Human actions are considered to be driven by will or intention. Kant presupposes that human beings are 'morally good' and 'occupy a special place in creation' (ibid: 22). Drawing upon this goodness or good will, the formulation of the categorical imperative is worded as follows: 'I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law' (ibid). Since the statement is

presented in a negative form, the procedure to apply the principle of categorical imperative is to assess the 'material maxims' (ibid) of the human action under consideration.

### Method

Following the earlier discussion of radio hosts as quasi-journalists and Pearson's (2015) treatment of them as journalists, this study analyses the three cases through a decision-making tool called systematic moral analysis (SMA). Developed by Elliott and Ozar (2010), SMA is a series of questions that approach and examine an ethical problem in a journalistic case from different angles. SMA, thus, can be visualised as a multi-layered sieve through which the action under consideration is made to pass. And by looking at the filtrate, one can decide whether the action is ethically permitted or prohibited. In fact, SMA lists four different ethical possibilities: ethically prohibited, ethically permitted, ethically required and ethically ideal.

The questions that constitute SMA are derived from the principles of Kantianism and rule utilitarianism (Hooker 2002). The latter holds the view that the morally right action is the one that produces the most good or brings about the greatest amount of good for the greatest number (Elliott and Ozar 2010). The principles of rule utilitarianism and Kantianism are not mutually exclusive, but here the focus will be on the set of SMA questions that are grounded on Kantianism. The application of Kantianism is preferred to rule utilitarianism because the impact of prank calls made by the radio hosts goes beyond ethics and into the realm of human rights – and Kant was one of the earliest exponents of the philosophical idea of human rights. Therefore, the set of SMA questions considered for the analysis is the following:

- Q1. Does the action fulfil one or more of the professional journalist's role-related responsibilities?
  - (a) Is the action serving the public in the society where the journalist practises? Or are the actions serving only the preferences of an individual or subgroup within the society?
- Q2. Will the action potentially cause emotional, physical, financial or reputational harm?
- Q3. Is causing this harm justified?
  - (a) Does the intended action respect all persons affected? Does it treat all persons in the situation consistently and impartially? (ibid: 23-24).

As such, SMA does not mandate a philosophical framework to answer the questions and determine the ethical validity (or invalidity) of the action. In the analysis, however, SMA will be used in conjunction with Kantian concepts to evaluate if the prank calls violate journalistic and Kantian ethics.

### Analysis and discussion

The three cases of prank calls are analysed through SMA questions and the Kantian concepts. In the first SMA question, the operative word is role-responsibility, which is the duty of a journalist to empower the citizens by accurately reporting on 'needed information' (ibid: 14) and keeping them informed. For example, citizens *need* (italics in original) information about governments and other power-wielding institutions – including persons holding offices – for self-governance and to function effectively as a democratic society. Journalists can also provide information to cater to the *desires* that the members of a society consider to be common to everyone, or almost everyone, in the society (ibid). Provision of such information is optional. Information that responds to desires comprises mostly 'soft-stories' such as news about cultural events and sports. These human interest stories promote human bonding. In addition to needs and desires, Elliott and Ozar (ibid) describe a third category of information as 'preferences' – individualised interests that do not affect the society directly and fail to create bonds. Preferences, therefore, do not constitute needed information.

Applying these criteria to the first case demonstrates that information about the Duchess's morning sickness is a preference, or at best, a desire, but certainly not needed information as it cannot assist the people in their self-governance. Knowledge about British royal family members holding no official power in the Australian or British society can only be a preference or desire of a certain number of people. Radio hosts, in this case, are thus akin to journalists producing soft stories rather than being hard news reporters. However, in Palin's case, it can be argued that the society needed to know more about its prospective vice-president. Although no notable information came out of the prank call, it did engage with the society through humour and critique, thus adding to the marketplace of ideas. Morales's case is different from the other two cases in that the goal of the prank call was not to extract information but to make a political point. The Spanish radio comedian who is believed to be 'an anti-socialist activist' (*Wikinews* 2005) lam-

pooned the Bolivian and Spanish governments to alert the society of the possible dangers of socialism. To that end, he acted as a watchdog of the government power thereby fulfilling the journalist's role-related responsibility of providing needed information, like the Canadian radio hosts.

The second SMA question analyses the harm of the journalistic action. The harm can be emotional, physical, financial or reputational. Because journalists fulfil a vital social function, according to the SMA, they have a *duty* to cause harm (italics in original). Thus, they must be able to 'evaluate effectively when they can prevent or reduce harm, when such harm is fully justified, and how to explain their choices both to those they harm and to the citizens they serve' (Elliott and Ozar 2010: 10). For example, no burglar would want to have their actions reported; yet, journalists cover these stories because such reports are likely to make potential victims aware and vigilant even though it causes harm to the burglar. Here it is instructive to emphasise Kant's concern with dignity. According to Kant, you can lock up a burglar because you respect that person's ethical capacity and are trying to correct him. In other words, you are not harming him, but aiming to do good.

The prank calls by the Australian and Canadian radio hosts represent opposite ends of the continuum in terms of harm or consequence. While the prank call by the Australian radio hosts led to the death of Saldanha (maximum possible physical and emotional harm), Palin was only 'mildly amused' (CBC News 2008) by the Masked Avengers. The prank call by the Spanish radio comedian falls somewhere in between. His call disturbed international relations, but was contained by some quick diplomacy on the part of the Spanish government. Using the harm principle of SMA, it can be debated that Saldanha had a moral right to be treated with respect and not be subjected to deception and irrevocable harm as she was not a stakeholder in the public realm. Palin and Morales, on the other hand, were public figures holding offices and arguably the limited harm caused to them can be justified on the basis of the public's right to know their political leaders in open, democratic societies.

The third SMA question asks if the journalistic action treats all persons impartially and respectfully. As explained in the previous section, the Kantian philosophy of ends as means is derived from reverence or respect for a rational being. Therefore, the third SMA question is related to the concept of ends as means. So essentially

the question to be considered here is: can the actions of the radio hosts be compatible with the idea of humanity as an end in itself? Quite clearly, Saldanha, Palin and Morales would not have attended the telephonic conversation and revealed the information had they known they were talking to radio hosts. In other words, Saldanha, Palin and Morales did not *share the ends* of the actions of the radio hosts. According to Kant (1956 [1785]), this implies that Saldanha, Palin and Morales were not used as ends in themselves by the radio hosts.

...it is manifest that a violator of the rights of man intends to use the person of others merely as a means without taking into consideration that, as rational beings, they ought always at the same time to be rated as ends – that is, only as beings who must themselves be able to share in the end of the very same action (ibid: 97).

Thus, for the Australian, Canadian and Spanish radio jockeys, Saldanha, Palin and Morales served only as means to ends, which ranged from rating points to checking government power.

In addition to the three questions from the SMA, Kant's concept of the categorical imperative has implications in the case of prank calls. As mentioned earlier, application of the categorical imperative will entail examining if the maxims (prank calling in the present case) can serve as a universal law. All three prank calls involved an intentional deception in the form of a statement, or more specifically, lying as the Australian, Canadian and Spanish radio hosts initiated the conversations by introducing themselves as the Queen, President Sarkozy and Prime Minister Zapatero. The moment the maxim – that is the act of prank calling, in other words, lying – is made a universal law, it becomes self-destructive because a law of lying cannot be universal. In fact, in his book *Groundwork of the metaphysic of morals*, Kant (1956 [1785]) illustrates the application of the categorical imperative by applying it to lying. He says:

But I can by no means will a universal law of lying; for by such a law there could properly be no promises at all, since it would be futile to profess a will for future action to others who would not believe my profession or who, if they ever did so over-hastily, would pay me back in like coin; and consequently my maxim, as soon as it was made a universal law, would be bound to annul itself (ibid: 71).

Using the principles of Kantianism, one could not establish that the conduct of the Australian radio hosts was more unethical than Spanish or Canadian radio hosts because Kantianism does not distinguish between the degrees of lying or ethical violation. Thus, for Kant, lying is impermissible whatever the circumstance – even if it saves lives. This finding resonates with Pearson's (2015) suggestion. 'Given the topic of the prank was the royal family,' Pearson explained, 'it raises the issue of the extent to which celebrity gossip-style journalism would be sustainable under a [Buddhist] Right Speech approach. The simple answer is that it would not. It would fall foul of the Buddha's disapproval of gossip-mongering...' (ibid: 462). In the cases of prank calls, the moral hardness of the Buddhist and Kantian principles contrasts with the SMA, and by extension, to rule utilitarianism, which takes the consequence of the actions into consideration.

At another level, it could also be argued that public response to lying or prank calls also plays a role in the determination of the ethical outcome. Because if the public at large considers a prank call a joke and not a lie, then we are outside of the realm of truth/untruth and move into that of play. If it's a joke, then the rules of social life are suspended for a moment and the risk to social life is reduced. Therefore, the more we see something as a joke, the more we are off the hook from some of the questions that philosophers ask. In other words, there could also be limitations of a broad-brush application of Kantianism or SMA to jokes or prank calls, and hence the public response to the cases should be carefully considered.

### Conclusion

The radio hosts in Australia could not have foreseen the tragic consequences of the call answered by Saldanha. Her mental state ostensibly contributed to her death as much as the call itself, but the fact that someone died warrants the actions of the radio hosts and the station they worked for to close legal and ethical inspection.

In the Spanish and Canadian cases, the calls to Morales and Palin had clear political overtones. In the tradition validated by Swift (McLeod 2011), the comedian at Cope Radio used humour to engage the public in a discussion about the rise of left-wing politics in Spain and Latin America. The Canadian hosts, meanwhile, introduced a non-scripted conversation of someone seeking a public office into the public sphere, allowing voters to make a more

informed choice. Regardless of whether one is politically conservative or liberal, engaging policy-related ideas is a mandate for democratic citizens. To the extent that humour promoted this, it can be said to have value.

At the same time, the deception inherent in prank calls left clear traces. In the Spanish case, the Bolivian and Spanish governments, along with the Catholic Church, were left to re-establish trust in relationships that were violated by the prank. Palin, meanwhile, was forced to re-establish her public credibility at a crucial time in the election. Is the established political order so far removed from the general public that someone with divergent views has an ethical right to use deception to infiltrate it? While it is difficult to answer this question, the analysis clearly raises it.

The cases in this study also have clear implications for professional journalism. The radio hosts, by making prank calls, practised widespread and public deception at a time when public opinion about news media is at all-time low (McCarthy 2014). Irrespective of their beats, journalists of good conscience need to consider the ethical implications of using deception to gather information. While it might have value in some cases, the violation of trust that deception necessarily entails should be carefully weighed. Journalists have to delineate between their own behaviour and that of the radio hosts engaged in gratuitous deception. Furthermore, thinking about vulnerability in ethical terms, we should concern ourselves with the concepts of fair and honest representation, truth and trust, accountability to those in the story, and minimising harm.

One tool to help them achieve this is ethical analysis through SMA, which enables them to weigh public good versus the deception involved, consider truthful alternatives that would achieve the same end and reflect on the moral implications of deception if they employ it. Not only will this safeguard the personal integrity of journalists, but through the accumulated development of personal integrity, will raise the standards of media. This frees them to bring people together, which helps society function, through the free and truthful flow of information. This, more than entertainment achieved through deception, matches journalism's intended purpose.

Finally, the analysis shows that prank calls in all three cases violated ethics according to Kant's ideas of ends as means and the categorical

imperative, but only in the Australian case was the prank call clearly unethical according to the terms of the SMA. It can be argued using the SMA that the prank calls in the Canadian and Spanish cases, while not ethically ideal, were ethically permitted because they served the higher purpose by producing skepticism among the public and speaking truth to power, both of which are needed in a democratic society (McLeod 2014). This difference in ethical outcome reflects the tension between Kantianism and SMA, and suggests that radio hosts, as quasi journalists, should also review the SMA before making prank calls which adopt a journalistic format. Prank calls may be innovative in terms of audience ratings, but as this study showed, they can also have dangerous consequences.

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