A Global Code

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The clear language of the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) Code of Ethics addresses a compendium of ethical concerns. However, globalization is actively and irreversibly drawing engineers into a global pool of labor and expertise where standards for ethical competition and cooperation will be challenged. Just as with 2009's amendment to the Code defining engineers' obligation to sustainable development and natural resources, globalization must likewise be addressed in direct terms. The ASCE Code of Ethics should be updated to include language defining civil engineers' ethical responsibilities as they relate to situations affected by globalization.

Points of ethical concern associated with globalization, such as documentation of contract labor, certification of skilled workers, fair fee and wage structure, and variation in national building standards, are not new. A footnote added to the Code in 1963 addressed such concerns affecting ASCE members working abroad. Then referred to as "the when-in-Rome clause," this subsection excused American engineers from full adherence to the Code of Ethics while working on foreign contracts. The clause stated that engineers working in foreign markets could "adapt (their) conduct to the professional standards and customs of that country," and simply "adhere as closely as is practicable" to the Code. The argument for this clause was that American engineering firms were losing vast profits to foreign competition whose standards were less stringent. By the 1970's, questionable overseas business practices and the subsequent damage to foreign relations were causing concern within the U.S., and in 1976 the when-in-Rome clause was removed from the ASCE Code (ASCE 2007, p. 5). Questions remain: should an updated, equally plain when-in-Rome-do-not clause have been implemented to replace the prior policy of ethical flexibility? And, did ASCE effectively condemn engineers from geographically scaling or suspending their ethics by revoking its explicit permission to do so?

By its strictest interpretation the ASCE Code of Ethics does prohibit engineers from ethical dereliction in Rome or elsewhere, and aforementioned globalization issues are addressed, if indirectly. Portions of the Code that deal with these issues are not always airtight in their meaning. For example, engineers in supervisory capacities might be considered as responsible

for worker documentation, in the U.S. or abroad, by Canon 6c, which asserts "zero tolerance for . . . fraud . . . in all engineering or construction activities . . . ." By another interpretation, the same engineers might be excused from strict responsibility for worker documentation by the softer language of Canon 6f, stating that engineers "should encourage" zero tolerance of fraud in contracts through certifications (ASCE, 2009). Regarding the complex issue of construction practices abroad, engineers might encounter conflicts between their fundamental obligation to public safety (set forth in Fundamental Canon a of the ASCE Code of Ethics), their obligation to control employers' costs (set forth in Canon 6b), and building practices they perceive as insufficiently strict. These directives are less tricky to interpret as they apply to domestic engineering work. In the global engineering environment, an adjusted code is necessary, and should obviously extend engineering ethics instead of narrow them.

Civil engineers benefit from popular support of responsible, well-managed growth and infrastructure management. Promoting infrastructure investment is thus politically sensitive; engineers' interest is easily cast as self-serving. This perception of conflict is potentially magnified in the case where American engineers work in under-developed countries. Applying high American standards to projects in nations than can less easily afford infrastructure investment can be seen as cultural absolutism, or worse, as profiteering. Still, the hypothetical failure of such a project and the galvanizing online reaction that would instantly follow dictate, in part, that ASCE publish and promote a globally oriented code of ethics. Consider ASCE's 2007 investigation of the New Orleans levees' failure during Hurricane Katrina. By the time Levees.org had published a video accusing ASCE of collusion with the Army Corps of Engineers and online media had reported the ensuing legal exchange, ASCE faced a protracted public relations problem (Schleifstein, 2007). Online followers of the story, many who might have never heard of ASCE before then, associated ASCE and its members with an alleged scandal. The two internal ethics investigations that followed at ASCE were arguably less interesting to readers and writers of succeeding Internet news cycles. Any loss of public trust is both inherently harmful to civil engineering and difficult to regain, but the dustup with Levees.org occurred on a relatively small scale in Internet terms. An incident of real or alleged ethical malfeasance on a global scale could permanently damage the stature of ASCE and of the civil engineering profession worldwide, all at electronic speed.

From the early 1960's on, media analyst and futurist Marshall McLuhan made predictions of a "global village:" worldwide, real-time, interpersonal interaction propagated by computer technology. McLuhan exhorted "mandatory" adaption to electronic communication, advising that everyone adjust to the vast global environment as if it were his little home town (McLuhan and Fiore, 1968). Cross-cultural awareness and interaction are increasing globally, if not completely established, through Internet communication. In point, a recent study of Facebook users concluded that the average degrees of separation between people on the social network was 4.74, down from the oft-cited, still remarkable six degrees between any two people worldwide (NPR, 2011). The importance of Marshall McLuhan's prescient predictions in the context of engineering ethics is that they predate elimination of the when-in-Rome clause by over a decade. Just as the modern state of global communication would not forgive dangerous, anachronistic attitudes toward ethics, it will reward forward thinking.

The business ethicist Thomas Donaldson put forth several important ideas regarding ethics in international business. Donaldson sought to define international business ethics as optimizing business's benefits (specialization, stabilization of output and distribution, liability resources, increased wages, etc.) over its drawbacks (pollution, depletion of natural resources, destruction of personal accountability, worker alienation, etc.) (Donaldson and Dunfee 1995, p. 177). Donaldson conceived of a "moral minimum" as the bedrock for modern international business ethics. The moral minimum was based on individual human rights, and physical security in particular. "At a minimum," Donaldson urged, "respect my rights" (Donaldson 1992, p. 3). Balanced, managed growth of civilization such as Donaldson describes, founded on individual safety, parallels the goal of modern civil engineering ethics. Globalization presents an opportunity for civil engineers to broadcast this goal as a standard that exceeds the minimum.

In accordance with ASCE's efforts to promote interest in the civil engineering profession, there should be a parallel, equivalent campaign to publicize ASCE's pursuit of ethical practices based on individual rights. Expanding the Code's scope to a global domain would present an opportunity to promote awareness of the ASCE Code of Ethics as it benefits society. Global, public knowledge of engineers' ethical values would help engineers politically by promoting their stewardship of the infrastructure and environment, while advancing ASCE's drive to attract

the finest minds to civil engineering. A credible campaign would not, however, be based solely on a marketing effort. It is time to adopt the ASCE Code of Ethics' language to encompass the worldwide professional activities of ASCE members, albeit in a spirit opposite the when-in-Rome clause.

The ASCE Code of Ethics should be changed, in relevant canons, by specifying "the global public" where "the public" is currently named. This is a simple but meaningful extension of ASCE's ethical model, and refers to ASCE members' role in global infrastructure and environmental management. The Code should also state a clear hierarchy of engineers' ethical obligations, expressing this hierarchy's global reach and relevance. A ranking is implied by the order in which the Fundamental Principles and the Fundamental Canons are listed. But, it is not sufficient simply to imply that protecting public safety, for instance, precedes all other strictures. This suggestion has relevance to engineering work performed worldwide: a ranking of ethical obligations would clarify ethical conflicts due to local attitudes, such as managing costs versus environmental responsibility or fair fee structuring. Finally, use of the word "should" must be eliminated, and "shall" used in its place through Canon 6. Rationally speaking, the term "should" does not obligate its subject. Ethical matters addressed in all of the Code's canons through Canon 6 are instances the Code can address absolutely.

Changing the Code of Ethics is not equal to enforcing more ethical behavior. When the Code's adoption was originally debated, one national engineering society astutely observed "that no gentleman needed a code of ethics, and that no code of ethics would make a gentleman out of a crook" (Lawson 2004, p. 32). Honest engineers, however, will meet any ethical bar. In the global village, the public will be increasingly aware of ASCE and its members' work. To support civil engineering in good faith, the public must be aware of engineers' respect for individual rights and social welfare. The intent of suggesting adjustments to the Code is not to police engineering activities but to humanize globalization in our ethical calculations, to address our inevitable destination of worldwide interdependence, and to further establish the ASCE Code of Ethics as the highest ethical standard in civil engineering.

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