



# **The SAGE International Encyclopedia of Mass Media and Society**

## **Norms**

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Norms (from the Greek *nómoi* and the Latin *norma*, meaning “carpenter’s square, rule, pattern”) are socially shared rules of behavior or action expressing what one ought and ought not to do under certain circumstances. Norms are authoritative rules or standards (of right and wrong or truth and falsehood) by which someone or something is judged and, on that basis, approved or disapproved. Therefore, norms are rules, precepts, and models that govern and guide the courses of social actions. This entry provides an overview of norms in general and social norms in particular, then explores media as a factor of socialization.

## Overview

However, these social actions must be followed by people as free beings, since, in the 4th century BCE, ancient Greek thinkers realized that the lives of individuals are not only affected by nature (*physis*) but also by all the conventions or norms (*nómoi*) of the society. Like all conventions, norms depend on collective will and agreement. Therefore, the opposition between *physis* and *nómoi* became the center of discussions, namely, regarding the issue of which aspects of social life are what people say they are by nature or by norms. Some thinkers (e.g., Plato) adopted a clearly anti-conventionalist position, while others (e.g., the Sophists) embrace conventions. Thus, people’s relations may be natural or conventional (e.g., the son keeps a natural family relationship with his father and a conventional family relationship with his father-in-law).

Since the ancient Greek thinkers, norms have been seen as the embodiment of values and virtues. For this reason, values and virtues are closely related concepts and are enforced by internal sanctions (e.g., feelings, awareness), regardless of whether external sanctions exist. Values and virtues are ethical concerns of moral norms, that is, rules for social coexistence or action guides because they tell people what (and how) they should and should not do as moral or immoral. Another related concept is law, that is, legal norms or mandatory rules, which are established by the state. Legal norms are written and based on moral norms. The majority of laws are based upon moral norms.

In modern Western societies, the functioning of social systems of norms was critically analyzed by Michel Foucault in the 1970s; his work is often reduced either to the thesis of a massive normalization of individual behavior or to the power exercised under the regime of the norms instead of according to laws. Foucault defined norm as a mixed of legality and nature, prescription, and constitution. Different groups, communities, and societies have different norms with different functions. Therefore, regarding Foucault’s perspective, one could question whether there are no norms, but only the simple and virtual normative use.

The concept of norms is not purely theoretical but also practical. Norms shape the social behavior and action, which may be right or wrong, but both should be performed with virtue, since they make us liable before the existing norms. According to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is not in order to acquire knowledge that we are considering what virtue is but to become good people. Consequently, following the norms is acting in accordance with right reasons.

## Social Norms

Social norms are the customary rules that govern groups and societies. According to sociology, social action is shaped by shared norms and values. Social norms are efficient means to achieve social ends (e.g., social order and regulation, cooperation and retribution, welfare maximization).

There are several norms in all activities, whether these are social, professional, educational, or religious, and people assume these norms are to be followed, but this doesn’t mean they really and always follow them. If norms are rules that prescribe or proscribe social behavior or action, they require the possibility of adherence

as well as violation. Norms are enforced by social mechanisms of reward or punishment. The incentives and the sanctions depend on the norms established by a community. Norm and deviance are antonyms, and both explain human behaviors.

The problem of freedom and responsibility arises from the association between individuals and norms, since individuals may, or may not, behave or act in a certain way. A major problem faced by ethics is the previously stated association, which is eminently tense, because establishing norms would either restrict freedom or grant social order. For this reason, norms must be unconditional, clear, and generally followed; otherwise, they lose their strength to impose what they prescribe or proscribe.

Norms, however, change like society and culture. Despite these changes, it is relevant to reflect on the conditions under which they emerge, change, and persist, as well on the social benefits of norms reducing the risk of exploitation through the sanctioning of its members' interactions.

## Mass Media as a Factor of Socialization

Norms are one of the most important elements of social cohesion and cultural reproduction. Socialization is the process that allows the transmission of social norms. One of the socialization factors (beyond the family, school, and peer groups) are mass media, which reach a wide audience. The audiences demand contents that are in accordance with norms of good taste and morality, but many norms aim to prevent the damage that mass media can cause.

In 1948, Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton outlined three social functions of mass media (i.e., the status conferral function, the enforcement of social norms, and the narcotizing dysfunction), and in the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan warned about the tendency of mass societies to become a *global village*, with the seal of new technological means of communication. According to McLuhan, mass media are reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of individuals' personal lives. Mass media provide not only information but also models of behavior, attitudes, social roles, and represent lifestyles. Advertising, for example, persuade consumption and extol, at the same time, social values of certain cultural patterns (e.g., beauty, success, wealth, youth).

The journalistic activity is necessarily regulated by codes of ethics that guarantee the guidance of important practices such as confirming the sources of information, ensuring the contradiction, following objectivity and impartiality, or seeking the truth; otherwise, moral principles and fundamental social values of society, such as truth, will be violated. Therefore, the media production must be also governed by norms, scrutinizing what can and should be published. Although there are areas in media where it is difficult to implement such norms, it is necessary to introduce ethical guidelines for blogs and other social media, for example, which have become increasingly popular and influential, enabling anybody to produce and publish content on the web. Introducing norms in new areas might regulate their use and prevent offensive or deviant actions.

**See also** [Ethics of Justice](#); [Moral Relativity](#); [Social Justice](#)

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- norms (social)
- social norms
- social action

- law

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## **Further Readings**

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