

Credo for Free and Responsible Use of Electronic Communication Networks
Supporting Materials
(accompanied amendment in 2013)

1. Rationale for why this statement merits Legislative Assembly consideration and how it is reflective of beliefs of those in the communication discipline

As a group of scholars dedicated to the study of human communication, we must recognize and consider in an official capacity the role that electronic communication networks has played in the manner in which we interact and share information with each other – be it as a matter of interpersonal, organizational, mass or other style of communication. Notably, the edits suggested here are a result of suggestions from the Report of the Task Force on Public Policy Platform Review from 2011, who marked this particular document for revisions, specifically citing “...the time that has elapsed since the adoption of some resolutions and the rapidity of technological, social and instructional methodology, updates and revisions are needed to enhance the relevancy of the policy platform.”

2. Relevant background information regarding the ethical issue

The original “Credo on Free and Responsible Use” was drafted in 1994, at a time in which electronic communication networks were in their infancy – in many ways, the credo was written as a prognostication of how networks might be used ‘in the future’. Much of the original document was focused singularly on issues of access with some mention of bureaucratic or sovereign interference, but the pith of the original credo was one focusing on closing the Digital Divide.

Yet, as the adoption and usage of electronic communication networks continues to grow, so have the issues associated with those networks. For example, much of the early focus on access divides – the digital “haves” and “have nots” – has evolved to a focus on issues of digital literacy and information privacy; that is, ensuring access to technology does not necessarily mean that all of those online are able to use the technology to its fullest extent, or use it in a manner that does not expose them to new threats. Current debates in the USA surrounding digital surveillance by the National Security Agency on US citizens’ mobile phone and e-mail exchanges, for example, suggest that the ethics of electronic communication are becoming an issue of “who has access to my information” rather than “do I have access to the network”. Similar debates involving information privacy include employer access to employees’ social media profiles and the role (and restriction) of social media in political dissidence also suggest that our attention might need to shift from “access” to “usage”. The revised resolution suggests that we consider the ethics of electronic communication networks as more than an issue of access as a statement of equality but should consider a focus on teaching networked users how to “be networked” in a responsible and secure manner.

Previous Resolution

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(approved by the SCA Legislative Council, 1994)

The principles of free and responsible communication have long been a hallmark of communication study. Since 1963, the Speech Communication Association has included among its core documents a Credo for Free and Responsible Communication in a Democratic Society. Recognizing the advent of electronic means of global communication that are accessible to the general public, we members of the Speech Communication Association endorse the following statement of principles relating to electronic communication:

We take the concept of "free speech" literally: there is limited freedom of expression if access to the means of expression is limited by financial ability. We, therefore, urge the development of free and low-cost means of accessing the means for processing and distributing information in electronic forms.

We realize that access is limited if specialized expertise is required to take advantage of the necessary technology. We, therefore, urge the development of hardware and software that requires minimal training but that still allows wide use of worldwide electronic resources.

We support freedom of expression and condemn attempts to constrain information processing or electronic communication, especially expressions that are offensive to some or even most of the populace. Likewise, we support a right to privacy, both in the ability to maintain the integrity of individual message exchanges and in the ability to shield oneself from unwanted messages. While supporting free expression, we nevertheless consider the maintenance of intellectual property rights to be crucial to the encouragement of creativity and originality. We, therefore, urge the designers and regulators of electronic forms of communication to use special vigilance to insure that the works of individuals or groups are protected from unfair use by others. We encourage communication researchers to produce findings that will guide policy decisions concerning the social impact of electron communication and to make those findings available widely. Likewise, we encourage the designers and regulators of electronic forms of communication to take credible findings about the social impact of their work into account as they implement new products and services.

We accept the need to teach students not only how to use electronic forms of communication but how to use them both wisely and well.

Finally, we call upon users of information processing and distribution networks to do so responsibly, with respect for language, culture, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and generational and economic differences they may encounter in others.