On Tuesday, 22 February 2011, a group of communications professionals in the Lehigh Valley gathered at DeSales University for lunch to discuss the possibility of forming an “info-ethics” group. In attendance were

TONYA AMANKWATIA (Director of Distance Education & Instructional Technology at DSU)
LINA BARBIERI (Executive Director of Annual Giving at DSU)
ERIC CHILES (adjunct faculty in Journalism; former Morning Call editorial board member)
FR. THOMAS DAILEY (Director of the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture at DSU)
MIKE KEENAN (owner, Keenan-Nagle Advertising, Inc.)
MATT KERR (Secretary of External Affairs/Director of Communication, Diocese of Allentown)
TOM McNAMARA (Executive Director of Communications at DSU)
MARTIN TILL (President/Publisher, The Express-Times and Lehigh Valley Live)

Following introductions of everyone, Fr. Tom Dailey explained the back-story for this gathering.

(1) Among the activities of the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture at DeSales University has been the formation of professional partnerships in particular fields (e.g., Bioethics, Ethics in the Workplace, Sport Ethics). It seeks now to explore the possibility of a similar venture in the field of media & communications.

(2) The University’s interest in this area comes from the legacy of its namesake – FRANCIS DE SALES (1567-1622) – who is a “doctor of the church” and the patron saint of journalists and writers. The former designation speaks to the value/worth of his innumerable writings. The latter designation reflects the story of his innovative use of pamphleteering to communicate ethical teachings. (To circumvent a local ordinance that prohibited the people of that town – Thonon, Switzerland – from listening to the Catholic bishop speak in public, Francis de Sales wrote his teachings, posted them around town, and eventually the people ignored the law and came to hear him speak.)

(3) The concept of “info-ethics” was presented. The idea to pursue this stems from a lecturer at DSU in January 2010 (Msgr. Paul Tighe, the Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications). As he explains it:

“The concern to establish the significance of ethics [in Communications] ... is itself the product of an increased societal awareness of the importance of professional ethics. The importance of medical ethics has long been recognized, but in recent years there has been a more intense focus on the importance of ethics for those who exercise their professions in the arena of law and politics, in the world of commerce and finance and in the areas of media, marketing and journalism. It was interesting to note that the most quoted remark from Pope Benedict’s Message for the 42nd World Communications Day in 2008 was his observation that: Many people now think there is a need, in this sphere, for "info-ethics", just as we have bioethics in the field of medicine and in scientific research linked to life. His insight
clearly touched a nerve and was widely reported as a call for the foundation of a new discipline of "info-ethics". This call was favourably received by a wide range of commentators, including many from outside the Catholic, or even religious, sphere. In the interests of accuracy, it should be pointed out the concept was not, as said by some, a papal creation but rather the endorsement of a concept that had enjoyed some currency at UNESCO and in the academic world. The response of people to the Pope’s use of the term demonstrates, above all, a public appetite for greater attention to be given to the ethical dimensions of communications. The Message itself - "The Media: At the Crossroads between Self-Promotion and Service. Searching for the Truth in order to Share it with Others." - provides a succinct presentation of some of the key ethical principles and values that should guide communications professionals. “

With this back-story in mind, the assembled group discussed several topics of importance in this area, among which were:

- the reliability of sources
- the believability of messages
- the problem of anonymity / need for accountability
- fair use
- polarizing positions
- the self-selectivity of news/radio channels (hearing only one side of an issue)
- the demand for interactivity from younger generations
- being engaged, consumers of information
- the desire to be first without regard for accuracy
- distinguishing news from opinion & rant
- the differences/variations in how news is communicated/received by younger generations

The lively conversation led to the conclusion that, indeed, the discussion should continue, with the express purpose of coming to a clearer understanding of what this group is and what it will do. Those in attendance suggested several other names of persons who should be at this table.

The group decided that another meeting should be held this semester. The get-together it has been scheduled for Tuesday, May 10, from 12:00 to 1:30 p.m., in the DeSales University Center on the main campus in Center Valley, PA.