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Ethics and the Internet

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Note: The following discussion is based on a lecture delivered on July 19, 2001, at the International Central/Eastern European School for the Humanities at Warsaw University, Warsaw, Poland. I want to express thanks to Dr. Chris Werry of DRWS for his advice and help on this project.

INTRODUCTION

Until relatively recently (mid-1990s) the Internet was seen an anarchic cyberspace, a virtual frontier, a digital analog of the wild West, a free-for-all in which everything is possible and everything is allowable. It was also largely a zone reserved for the brave and the daring, the uniquely cyber-literate. Both of these perceptions are changing rapidly as commercial and everyday uses of the Internet proliferate and as the Internet becomes a communication tool available to all.

As the Internet permeates ever more domains of social and political, and even personal, life, and as its technological capabilities expand, the problem of Internet ethics will become ever more central, perhaps even more so than in "ordinary" life. The potential for abuse grows with use, as well as with technological power. As the editorial introduction to the first issues of the journal *Ethics and Information Technology* put it:

"... information technology is profoundly affecting the opportunities and capacities of individuals to act in morally and socially responsible ways. Information technology is profoundly changing the character of social, political, and economic institutions, as well as social arrangements that aspire to the ideals of justice and human well-being. The permeation of information technology throughout our world is challenging and changing fundamental moral concepts and social values such as freedom, democracy, privacy, responsibility, and so on." (1)

The problem of ethics in relation to the Internet has as many aspects as there are uses of the Internet and presents as many diverse issues as there are possibilities for misuse and abuse of the technology and of the human relations it mediates and facilitates. The following discussion thus lists some of the major aspects of the problem and outlines a few of the issues each aspect presents. These aspects include:

- Internet conduct
- research on the Internet

- business on the Internet
- politics and the Internet
- on-line education
- legal issues
- social issues
- identity issues
- privacy issues

The brief discussion of these issues that follows is intended as a rough map of the territory of ethics and the Internet. Each of the aspects of the problem, and each of the issues each aspect presents, lends itself to further inquiry. The main goal of this introduction is thus to serve as a starting point for further inquiry into the complex problem of ethics and the Internet.

ETHICS AND THE INTERNET: MAJOR ASPECTS AND ISSUES

Internet Conduct

Acceptable behavior on the Internet is not governed by any coherent and unified set of laws or rules or by any organization or body but rather emerges as "an amalgam of service providers' acceptable use policies, codes of conduct, and the implications of certain laws" (Robson and Robson 2).

Acceptable use policies are agreements made between the user and the service provider that generally include provisions for what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable uses of the network. These policies are probably the most structured form of control of how we use the Internet (Robson and Robson), although most of us probably do not read them, any more than we read safety instructions in the manuals for the gadgets we buy. An example of an acceptable use policy are the "Rules of Use" of the MIT Net (MITNET), the Massachusetts Institute of Technology computer network, which state that:

All members of the MIT community are obligated to use these facilities in accordance with applicable laws, with Institute standards of honesty and personal conduct, and in ways that are responsible, ethical, and professional.

All users of MITnet should make sure that their actions don't violate the privacy of other users, even if unintentionally" including "Don't try to intercept or otherwise monitor any network communications not explicitly intended for you.

Codes of conduct are informal codes of on-line behavior developed over time by the online community, as well as by specific communities (such codes are often referred to as "netiquette"). These codes developed spontaneously as the Internet grew and developed. They outline standard practices for the various uses of the Internet (email, newsgroups, MOOs, MUDs, and so on). These codes are continually being discussed and refined by organizations such as Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility (CPSR) and the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF).

A minimum set of netiquette guidelines that may be adopted by companies or groups to govern conduct on their networks or services is provided by the document RFC1855 produced by the Responsible Use of the Network Working Group of the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF). It covers one-to-one communication, one-to-many communication, and information services. These guidelines emphasize observing the guidelines and culture of the group you are participating in. They also highlight the fact that the Internet is a global communication environment made up of people representing a wide variety of

cultures, religions, and lifestyles and that you should be tolerant of this variety and keep an open mind about it. Among other things, these guidelines include the following:

In the email section: "In general, rule of common courtesy for interaction with people should be in force for any situation and on the Internet it's doubly important where, for example, body language and tone of voice must be inferred."

"Any time you engage in One-to-Many communications, all the rules for mail should also apply. After all, communicating with many people via one mail message or post is quite analogous to communicating with one person with the exception of possibly offending a great many more people than in one-to-one communication. Therefore, it's quite important to know as much as you can about the audience of your message."

"Some mailing lists are private. do not send mail to these lists uninvited. Do not report mail from these lists to a wider audience."

"Tell users what you plan to do with any information you collect, such a WWW feedback. You need to warn people if you plan to publish any of their statements, even passively by just making it available to other users."

Many guides on netiquette are available on the web. One of the most frequently referenced is Arlene H. Rinaldi's "The Net User Guidelines and Netiquette." (<http://www.fau.edu/rinaldi/net/index.html>)

Included in Rinaldi's guidelines are the ten commandments of Internet conduct from the Computer Ethics Institute:

1. Thou shalt not use a computer to harm other people.
2. Thou shalt not interfere with other people's computer work.
3. Thou shalt not snoop around in other people's files.
4. Thou shalt not use a computer to steal.
5. Thou shalt not use a computer to bear false witness.
6. Thou shalt not use or copy software for which you have not paid.
7. Thou shalt not use other people's computer resources without authorization.
8. Thou shalt not appropriate other people's intellectual output.
9. Thou shalt think about the social consequences of the program you write.
10. Thou shalt use a computer in ways that show consideration and respect.

Beyond such general guidelines, many user groups and electronic communities have developed their own netiquette rules or guidelines that apply to their chat rooms or news groups.

Ethics and Research on the Internet

Much discussion of Internet ethics has to do with the ethics of Internet research, esp. social science research, for instance, qualitative research on Internet groups. The ethical considerations pertinent to such research consist of codes of conduct that relate to behavior in computer-mediated groups and communities and codes of conduct relating to the practice of social research (Robson and Robson). These considerations generally relate to issues of informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, dignity, and avoidance of harm. Major professional social science organizations, such as the American

Sociological Association and the British Sociological Association have developed guidelines for social research. (For an example, see the American Sociological Association Codes of Ethics <http://www.asanet/ecoderev.htm> or British Sociological Association Statement of Ethical Practice <http://dialspace.dial.pipex.com/town/parade/ot36/ethgu2.htm>)

One of the more interesting statements in the debate on the ethics of online research has been made by Maria Bakardijeva and Andrew Feenberg. The debate about the ethics of Internet (or online) research can, according to Bakardijeva and Feenberg, "serve as a guide for finding one's bearings on the broader question of privacy in cyberspace" (manuscript page 2). Bakardijeva and Feenberg suggest the notion of "non-alienation" as the guiding principle of on-line research ethics. Non-alienation means avoiding alienation, that is, taking content of online communication out of its context of original occurrence without explicit permission of concerned parties. Bakardijeva and Feenberg define alienation, following Henri Lefebvre's "Critique of Everyday Life" (1947) as "the appropriation of the products of somebody's action for purposes never intended or foreseen by the actor herself, drawing these products into a system of relations over which the producer has no knowledge or control" (9). Bakardijeva and Feenberg suggest that "respect for the intent with which online communities have generated content emerges as a fundamental ethical principle of social life online" (7). And further: "this 'nonalienation principle' should be the basis of emergent social conventions in cyberspace," and it should apply to researchers and anyone else lurking in cyberspace (9). Furthermore, Bakardijeva and Feenberg suggest that debates on ethics in virtual community research has been an "exemplary area where important ethical questions have been raised," questions that have not been raised in the context of regular human subject research, journalism, and other non-online contexts (9).

Ethics and Business on the Internet

The Internet is quickly becoming a major conduit for business, esp. retail. On-line business has raised a host of new issues which are too numerous to discuss in detail. They include honesty and responsibility, accountability, privacy and confidentiality, protection of data (i.e. credit card numbers), freedom from invasiveness (i.e. so-called sticky websites that automatically track and retain customer contact and information), quality of the goods delivered, disclosure and reliability of information (i.e. the scandal with fake paintings sold on eBay), sources of goods, Internet economics vs. traditional economics, impacts of global Internet business, employment through the net (local and global telecommuting), web advertising, competition on the Internet (hacking into data, falsification of data), public information and financial disclosure (investor relations on the Internet), and others.

One aspect of on-line business dealings is worth highlighting, esp. from the point of view of consumers: the issue of privacy. The issue of on-line privacy includes protection of your data, such as credit card numbers, as well as other aspects, such as disseminating your information to third parties, getting flooded with junk mail, and so on.

Most on-line businesses have a privacy notice (it is the small print we typically ignore -- at our peril -- as we browse web pages). For a consumer, the privacy notice may be the first, and major, sign of what may be in store while using the services of an on-line business. It is thus worth knowing something about on-line privacy notices.

The Better Business Bureau (BBB) has developed comprehensive guidelines for

commercial on-line privacy notices. According to these guidelines, a good on-line privacy notice should include the following (you may check whether the business you may currently be dealing with meets those guidelines):

- all intended uses of information
- a website contact responsible for privacy
- an email contact for questions and problems
- a commitment to a mediated dispute-resolution process
- disclosures about things not covered by the privacy policy
- information about transfers of information to third parties
- disclosure whether information collected on-line is merged with information collected elsewhere
- information on how to access your personal information and how to correct any inaccuracies
- commitment to data security and steps taken to protect data. In addition, on-line privacy notices should be
- easy to find and easy to understand
- clearly linked to or displayed on every page where information is collected
- clearly inform users of the site's information practices
- if other entities reside on the site, their privacy policies must also be disclosed or made accessible.

Typical problems with privacy notices, policies, or practices on commercial websites include:

- privacy policy may be hard to find or difficult to read and understand
- it may not contain all the disclosures
- it may use vague and unspecific language ("we do not generally share information with third parties"; "we only share information with companies and parties that do business with us")
- it may not comprehensively list all of the types of information being collected
- it may fail to provide a contact address or procedures for dealing with complaints, corrections, or conflict resolution
- it may not state the site's commitment to data security
- it may not have clear access requirements or procedures for verifying a valid requester before granting access.

You may test your favorite commercial website for these shortcomings. One of the best examples of a good, comprehensive privacy policy is the website of Dell Computers at www.dell.com for a good example of privacy policy (if you check it, notice the BBB seal on top of the website and click on it to see that it really links to the BBB -- this link is the test of whether the privacy policy of any commercial website is really BBB-approved or just a fake, as happens quite often).

Ethics and Politics on the Internet

The political issues related to Internet ethics include the implications of global information infrastructure in terms of freedom and quality of assembly, deliberation, community information and decision-making, the notion of subject assumed in Internet community architecture, and the kind of public/civic organization and participation made possible by Internet web pages.

The Internet is becoming an important medium of public information, including

political information. Such uses, and especially the uses of the Internet by political parties, can help reduce the "democratic deficit" visible in many Western countries, where there are serious problems in public political communication (i.e. communication between the government and the governed and between political parties and the public).

The Internet is rapidly emerging as "a vital tool in the armory of the modern political party" (Nixon and Johansson 2). Internet messages by parties are free from possible misrepresentations by journalists. On the other hand, they are open to sabotage as hackers may break into the site and change that representation, as happened to the Labor Party in Britain. As used by political parties and other forces, the Internet may open up new possibilities of participation in the political process, explain complex issues, pose or answer vital questions; on the other hand, it may also falsify, misrepresent, and trivialize. As the use of the Internet both by the public and by political parties and forces increases, it will become an even more vital element on the political scene.

The ethical issues relevant to the political uses of the Internet concern such broad questions as access, quality of information, legitimacy and value, and communication.

Access is lately bound up with inequality of access, which has economic and geographic aspects (as well as racial, social, age, and other related to the above).

Information is related to the quality and navigability of the homepages, and the value of the information contained there, as well as the quality of political participation enabled. (Check the homepages of the major political parties in the US and elsewhere to see the different representations and mechanisms displayed there.) In many countries (i.e. South Africa, but also in Western Europe) there is also the issue of language (as well as of accessibility of information, for instance, for the blind or otherwise handicapped). For instance, in the countries of the European Union, most political parties put up information on the web only in the major language of the country, sometimes in regional lingua franca languages (such as Swedish in Denmark or Norway), which may be surprising, given the theoretical assumption of, and increasingly a fact of, mobility of the EU population across national frontiers and the increased expectations of political participation for EU populations (Nixon and Johansson). For instance, most Internet political communication in Britain exists only in English (in spite of the high level of immigration, historic world-wide reach of the British empire, and political and economic ambitions of Great Britain).

Other questions with potential ethical import are what kind of information is provided (text only, pictures, photos of candidates or leaders, pre-digested information or actual texts, depth and extent of analysis, further links, possibility of original interpretation of information and for developing independent and critical perspectives and points of view, the degree of personalization of information--the "party line" vs. candidates' and politicians' individual views and personal voices, not to mention the degree of social responsibility expressed or implied in all of above). See for instance, the British Green Party website, the best in this respect. Another issue is the potential for interactivity offered visitors.

Overall, we can expect major changes in the self-representations of political parties and forces, as well as perhaps in the conduct of the political process itself as political uses of the Internet proliferate (i.e. better representation of minority views, dissenting views, individual views, fuller and deeper popular

participation, and so on). On the other hand, we can also expect more novel and ethically suspect practices and a rise of new ethical issues as the Internet continues to change the way politics is conducted.

On-line Education and Ethics

The topics of on-line education is vast. Ethical issues to consider here include interactivity, personal contact vs. IT, control over learning, privacy, quality of educational experience, impact on the nature of learning, impact of IT on the nature of teaching, impact on the nature of the university, and so on. All of these issues have profound ethical implications that still remain largely to be explored.

Legal Issues and Internet Ethics

The legal issues in Internet use include such issues as intellectual property, privacy (almost every commercial website has a privacy statement), reliability and accountability, data protection, censorship vs. freedom of expression (pornography, hate speech, restricted data), Internet crime (i.e. hacking) and justice, information technology in the workplace (surveillance, control, empowerment vs. disempowerment, equity), terms of participation, and service agreements,

Social Issues and Internet Ethics

Social issues related to Internet use include ethical issues of information technology in the home (impact on children, family life), information technology in the workplace (patterns of work, work design, decision making, deskilling), and so on.

Identity and Ethics on the Internet

Issues of identity and ethics included considerations of how people speak, present themselves, interact, how are gender, race, and class translated to the online sphere, and so on.

Privacy on the Internet

One aspect of Internet ethics that touches on all of the above dimensions is the problem of privacy.

Electronic communications are not conducted in private. New technologies make it possible to eavesdrop on virtually any communication and to access any data (remember how the court got Bill Gates's damaging emails out of a server years after they were sent?). Email is stored in servers as it passes on its merry way and you have no idea where your words or information may end up. A good rule to remember is on the Internet nothing ever completely disappears and nothing can be completely controlled.

For instance, most employers have no policy on electronic privacy. In the absence of any statement to the contrary, you should assume you have no privacy in your workplace. From a legal perspective, employees have few privacy rights. Typically, courts have sided with employers in disputes regarding electronic monitoring of employee communications.

JAB

Protection of individual privacy on-line is best achieved through cooperation between employers, service providers, software developers, governments, and information collectors. The burden of protection should fall on those collecting or using data, not on the multitude of individuals using the net to go about their daily activities. According to the Computer Professional for Social Responsibility, "every user should be able to conduct activities without the knowledge of uninvolved parties, and without the risk of having these activities or their embedded information logged for unrelated purposes" (CPSR Privacy Principles, <http://www.cpsr.org>).

CONCLUSION

As you can see even from the above brief outline, the problem of ethics and the Internet extends over a very large territory, with very many specific issues and problems. These problems get more complex and more provocative every day as the reach of the Internet, its uses, and its technical capabilities increase exponentially. As the recent emergence of the journal *Ethics and Information Technology* shows, the problem of ethics and the Internet has become a new and exciting intellectual frontier. This frontier is especially appropriate to scholars in rhetoric, communication, and writing, including technical and professional writing, since so much of the problem has to do with the way content is communicated, arranged, organized, conducted, and shaped, and since many of those who are responsible for this communication are professional communicators. The Internet is indeed emerging as the new frontier for all sorts of communication as well as for communication professionals. It is also a new frontier for business, politics, education, and human relationships. This frontier will perhaps soon largely shape the way we interact with each other and conduct much of our life. The problem of ethics in this conduct is thus a matter of the fundamental tenor of life in the emerging global civilization.

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Class Discussion Questions & Activities

- 1) What is “ethics” and do you think that the notion has changed from what was considered acceptable in the past?
- 2) In the light of the previous topic of electronic communication, to what extent has the new “information age” technologies altered the notions of ethical behaviour? *Hint: think of issues such as plagiarism, copyright, music/movie downloading and so on.*

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