

Ethics and Social Media

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1. INTRODUCTION

The last two decades have witnessed a rapid transformation of traditional media into new media that encompasses digital, computerized, and networked information and communication technologies. This shift has raised concerns and discussions around the positive and negative implications of the new media, and other issues such as: control of information, volume and speed of communication. Social networking sites, video-sharing sites, wikis, blogs, among many others, have evolved as a result of web concepts and new media technologies. Millions of people around the globe, through social networking like internal, external, or mobile are recently building online local, regional, and global communities to communicate their shared interests and activities, disseminate information, and interact through a variety of web-based tools. The use of new media and social networks (e.g. Myspace, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter,) has implications for society, culture, and politics that has encouraged researchers to investigate a variety of related issues such as: social identity, privacy, distance learning, social capital, sociopsychological effects of the web, misuse of cyberspace, diaspora, social status, and access to information.

2. ETHICS, DISCLOSURE AND THE MORALITY OF TECHNOLOGY

Social media unlike traditional media are usually interactive in nature, so users can comment on and edit published material, making it difficult to control content. Social media blurs private/public boundaries when personal information and opinions enter the public domain. The boundaries between personal and work life also become blurred as companies make use of social media, designed primarily for personal use, for business purposes, and likewise employees access personal sites while at work.

There has been a transformation in communication because of social media. Here are some changes that have occurred in the process of the flow of information.

- People have now become both the producer and consumer of information.
- News can be shared instantly online before it even reaches the television.
- The judgment of communication is both positively and negatively affected.
 - It is up to the reader to decide whether or not the information is true and credible. The reader must carefully look at the context, channel, and author of the information.

- Because more people communicate online, the value of face-to-face communication is lost. This has multiple effects on the way a message is received and interpreted.
- People have the scope to filter out and choose the types of messages they need and those they do not.

3. CONTEMPORARY ETHICAL CONCERNS ABOUT SOCIAL NETWORKING SERVICES

While the social and natural sciences focus on the impact of Social Networking Services(SNS) on psychosocial markers of happiness/well-being, psychosocial adjustment, social capital, or feelings of life satisfaction, philosophical concerns about social networking and ethics have generally centered on topics less amenable to empirical measurement, e.g., privacy, identity, friendship, the good life and democratic freedom. More so than ‘social capital’ or feelings of ‘life satisfaction,’ these topics are closely tied to traditional concerns of ethical theory, e.g., virtues, rights, duties, motivations and consequences.

3.1 SOCIAL NETWORKING SERVICES AND PRIVACY

Technologies of social networking have added a new sense of urgency and new layers of complexity. Some fundamental practices of concern include: the potential availability of users’ data to third parties for commercial, surveillance or data mining purposes; the capacity of facial-recognition software to automatically identify persons in uploaded photos; the ability of third-party applications to collect and publish user data without their permission or awareness; the frequent use by SNS of automatic ‘opt-in’ privacy controls; the use of ‘cookies’ to track online user activities after they have left a SNS; the potential use of location-based social networking for stalking or other illicit monitoring of users’ physical movements; the sharing of user information or

patterns of activity with government entities; and, last but not least, the potential of SNS to encourage users to adopt voluntary but imprudent, ill-informed or unethical information sharing practices, either with respect to sharing their own personal data or sharing data related to other persons and entities.

3.2. THE ETHICS OF IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY ON SOCIAL NETWORKING SERVICES

Technologies social networking open up a new type of ethical space in which personal identities and communities, both ‘real’ and virtual, are constructed, presented, negotiated, managed and performed. SNS such as Facebook can also be viewed as enabling authenticity in important ways. While the ‘Timeline’ feature displaying my entire online personal history can prompt me to ‘edit’ my past, it can also prompt me to face up to and assimilate into my thoughts and actions that might otherwise be conveniently forgotten.

3.3. FRIENDSHIP, VIRTUE AND THE GOOD LIFE ON SOCIAL NETWORKING SERVICES

SNS can facilitate many types of relational connections: LinkedIn encourages social relations organized around our professional lives, Twitter is useful for creating lines of communication between ordinary individuals and figures of public interest, MySpace was for a time a popular way for musicians to promote themselves and communicate with their fans, and Facebook, which began as a way to link university cohorts and now connects people across the globe, has recently seen a surge in business profiles aimed at establishing links to existing and future customers. These sorts of questions about how online friendships measure up to offline ones, along with questions about whether or to what extent online friendships encroach upon users’ commitments to embodied, ‘real-world’ relations with friends, family members and communities, defined the ethical problem-space of online friendship as SNS began to emerge.

3.4 DEMOCRACY, FREEDOM AND SOCIAL NETWORKING SERVICES IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

As is the case with privacy, identity, community and friendship on SNS, ethical debates on the impact of SNS on civil discourse, freedom and democracy in the public sphere must be seen as extensions of a broader discussion about the political implications of the Internet. A related topic of concern is the potential of the Internet to fragment the public sphere by encouraging the formation of a plurality of ‘echo chambers,’ informational silos for like-minded individuals who deliberately shield themselves from exposure to alternative views. The worry is that such insularity will promote extremism and the reinforcement of ill-founded opinions, while also preventing citizens of a democracy from recognizing their shared interests and experiences. Finally, there is the question of the extent to which SNS can facilitate political activism, civil disobedience and popular revolutions resulting in the overthrow of authoritarian regimes.

3.5 SOCIAL NETWORKING SERVICES AND CYBERCRIME

SNS have been targeted, especially in mass media, as potential hosts for a broad spectrum of ‘cybercrimes,’ including but not limited to: cyberbullying, cyberstalking, child exploitation, illegal surveillance, identity theft, intellectual property and copyright violations. Cybercrime is an enduring topic of philosophical interest for the broader field of computer ethics, and the migration to and evolution of such crime on SNS platforms may raise new and distinctive ethical issues in the coming decades.

4. SOCIAL NETWORKING SERVICES AND METAETHICAL ISSUES

A host of meta-ethical questions are raised by the rapid emergence of SNS as a dominant medium of interpersonal connection.

SNS and other emerging information technologies do not reliably confine themselves to national or cultural boundaries, and this creates a particular challenge for applied ethicists. For example, SNS practices in different countries must be analyzed against a conceptual background that recognizes and accommodates complex differences in moral norms and practices concerning, for example, privacy. Other SNS phenomena that one might expect to benefit from intercultural analysis and that are relevant to the ethical considerations include: varied cultural patterns and preference/tolerance for affective display, argument and debate, personal exposure, expressions of political, interfamilial or cultural criticism, religious expression and sharing of intellectual property. Alternatively, the very possibility of a coherent information ethics may juxtapose challenge, for example, from a constructivist view that emerging socio-technological practices like SNS continually *redefine* ethical norms—such that our analyses of SNS and related technologies are not only ceased to operate from shifting ground, but from ground that is being shifted *by* the intended object of our ethical adjudgement.

There are, thus, pressing practical concerns about whether and how philosophers can actually have an impact on the ethical profile of emerging technologies such as SNS. If philosophers direct their ethical analyses only to other philosophers, then it is likely such analyses will function simply as ethical postmortems of human-technology relations, with no opportunity to actually pre-empt, reform or redirect unethical technological practices.

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