

ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF ADVANCED COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES AND DIGITAL NEW MEDIA

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Abstract

Information and communication technologies (ICT) have created fundamental impacts on human life, in every domain of life. Advent of Internet technology is one that brought social change, touching almost every aspect of life which effected the journalism also to a great extent. Digital new media is the novelty which technological revolution brought have provided many opportunities to access the information and to communicate. However, the development is not one-sided, there are also new challenges and threats. This study aims to provide a framework for analysis the ethical issues and establishing an approach to meet ethical challenges in the digital new media.

Keywords: Information and communication technologies (ICT), digital new media, ethical issues, ethical approaches.

INTRODUCTION

Individuals are living in societies. Have needs; have relations with each other; have an aim to sustain and be happy. In the age of advanced technology and globalization; individuals, groups and societies have high level of communication and interaction. We are living in a system. In systems, all entities affect the others and are affected from each other. In our globe, we, humans or the structures we are building; are affecting each other at every moment, with any choice, any decision, any word or any action. To reach and realize the aim of sustainability of the humanity and the world, the principles and rules are needed for living together. With the increasing rate of interaction, that necessity seem spreading in different areas of life, including daily real life to relations in digital life.

Advanced technology is taking more and more place in our lifes everyday. Technology is being used almost in every domain of life. A greater part of technology using is being realized through communication which are the products of high development of information and communication technologies (ICT). Increase in scope, speed, alongside with new facilities brought new types and new media for communication. Change in communication points out change in society; which has different attributes. One of the prominent feature of technology seems as its existence as indispensable. The impacts of information and communication technologies created threats as well as benefits. Among those the ones related with digital media raised new ethical questions and discussions. The high speed of improvement has the potential to conceal the problems. This paper aims to identify ethical issues in new digital media and discuss different approaches for resolution. Literature review relevant to research topic has been conducted.

1. THE IMPACT OF NEW COMMUNICATION ON SOCIETY AND ETHICS

Starting in the second half of the 20th Century, information technologies increased the development pace and expanded in societies. In our day, ICT are being used almost everywhere, in every area. Johnson explains that

the term “information society” is often used to refer the societies in which ICT are a critical part of the infrastructure through which economic, political, and cultural life is constituted (Johnson, 2009: 55).

Since ICT became broad and effective, have created tremendous impacts on individual and societal lives. The advent of Internet has major part in this role so that the Globe could be defined as “Before Internet” and “After Internet”. In ICT-configured societies, many of the actions of individuals and organizations instrumented through ICT. Among these, communication media is a crucial one to effect social conscious and social practice. Therefore, the ethical use of technology as a media tool is very vital for societies.

Communication, which is an intrinsic feature of society is one of the fields that was much effected by the technological advancement. Social change is intertwined with the change in communication, besides, technology is among the infrastructural elements which creates the social change. Consequently, technology constitutes determining impacts on the quality of the society where it is being used intensely as a communication instrument. Along with they have boosted the inter-personal communication, high development in network technology and mobile phones also generated big facilities for mass communication tools in their professional conduct. Advent of Internet has increased the communication between individuals, groups and organizations; on the other hand, is being used effectively by the traditional media like printed press and television. Improvements in technology and broad use of Internet have offered great novelties for news production and transmission.

This social change is not in one direction. The impacts of the Internet are not only benefits for individuals and society. The rise of the Internet had also brought upon some negative effects which can be detrimental for fundamental human values and societal life.

2. DIGITAL NEW MEDIA

Technological advancement and the widespread use of Internet brought great novelties on news production and distribution. New media or digital media which are the phenomenon by that innovation had generated have a crucial part in our daily ordinary social practice. As Ess emphasizes, “(...) our lives are inextricably interwoven with what are sometimes called ‘New Media’ or digital media” (Ess, 2014: 7). Beside the personal e-mails, e-groups, weblogs and the other digital communication environment such as “Facebook”, “Twitter” and so on, mass communication tools which are described as traditional media like printed press and broadcasting business are also using new communication technologies and Internet medium intensely for their professional conduct. The prominent feature of digital new media is its inclusiveness of all people who use information and communication technologies (ICT) besides the professional journalists for production and distribution of the news.

Along with the new technological applications, there has been revolutionary changes in journalism profession. In addition to the changes in professional activities by using technology as an instrument and medium, these novelties have brought organizational alterations also.

“Citizen journalism” is another new practice in today’s society which is a product of the rise in the penetration of mobile communication technologies all over the society. Ess states that the people with access to digital media technologies – including the cameras in the phones – are no longer simply consumer of news. Rather, whether by intention, or by accident, digital media allow to take up the roles previously accorded to professional journalists (Ess, 2014: 143). Citizen journalists also report events like professional journalists. The information can take many forms. It can include text, pictures, audio and video (Rogers: 1). The advanced mobile phones have great contribution in this activity. According to Ward; “ (...) as newsroom staff shrink, and the popularity of online news grow, organizations are increasingly able and willing, to collaborate with citizens in covering disasters, accidents, and other breaking news.” (Ward: 6).

The distinct features of digital new media are;

- Immediacy,
- Interactivity,
- Easeness,
- Being global,
- The ability to copy, distribute and store the content.

Charles Ess explains three distinguishing characteristics (beside other important ones) of digital media as; (in contrast with analogue media) digital media foster convergence, digital information as “greased” and digital media as communication media with the features of global scope, interactivity and effects on selfhood/identity (Ess, 2014: 9, 16).

The technical capabilities of digital environment which made possible to conjoin the different forms of content created the “convergence” characteristics. For example; a webpage of an online journal or a weblog can have text, visuals and audio materials at once. The capability of sending the information on Internet medium immediately is another prominent feature, being able to distribute globally as well.

3. DIGITAL NEW MEDIA AND ETHICAL ISSUES

Digital new media have determinative impacts on social reality which are both beneficial and damaging. Some of the ethical issues may have existed already. What makes digital new media distinct comes from the power of ICT and the new capabilities for communication, news production and distribution. Any instance of communication has potential ethical issues inherently to the degree that the communication can be judged on a right-wrong dimension (Johannesen et. al., 2008, 2). Because it involves possible significant influence on other humans (Johannesen et. al., 2008, 2). Communication, whether between two people or among groups or institutions; convey information and generate consequences. Makau states that communication involves choices, reflects values, and has consequences, so, these three key elements of communication form the basis of its relation with ethics (Makau, 2012: 1). These consequences include the impacts on other’s choices, decisions, actions.

The ethical issues which exist on digital new media may be the old ones which gained new capabilities or the new ones have just emerged. Some of the issues arise by virtue of the features of digital new media. Ess points out that “(...) what were once distinct set of ethical issues now likewise converge – sometimes creating new combinations of ethical challenges that we haven’t had to face before (2014: 12)”. For example, photograph people in public without asking for their consent; the ethics of both consent in photography and copyright in publication are now conjoined in new ways (Ess, 2014:13).

The features of digital new media such as immediacy, easiness, being interactive and global bring new opportunities, on the other hand may have causal impact on the emerging ethical issues. For example, the “ability” to produce, copy and distribute inaccurate news immediately and globally may augment the negative impact. “Copying” capability is another issue which may cause to plagiarism problems, may cause the intellectual property rights to be violated. Distribution of the information from the unreliable sources is another big problem which points out accuracy and trust issues in digital society.

The expected principles and standards in the digital new media have similarities with the ones existing in the traditional media. What makes them different is formed through the potential of violation caused by the technological advances. The main principle and duty of the journalism is reporting the truth in the public interest. The news should be produced without harming any alive, should comprise the accurate information, reports should be newsworthy, should not damage public, should watch for public’s benefit. The journalists should respect the others’ rights while conducting their profession. Those principles are also valid for digital new media.

In that respect; ethical issues in digital new media:

Accuracy and truth telling: This problem also has created the big issue about trust in today’s world. Jacquette states that “Commitment to truth and accuracy in news reporting is recognized as a fundamental obligation in journalistic ethics” (Jacquette, 2007:12). In today’s society, not only professional journalists but all the people who are communicating on digital environment, creating and distributing news also have the same obligation. The high speed of communication traffic in today’s digital society threatens accuracy and quality. Besides, inaccurate information has the same “opportunity” to be distributed immediately, globally.

Privacy: Private lives and private information have been effected much by the technical capabilities of digital new media. When information is computerized, the digital information can move quickly from one place to another and that raises especially serious ethical issues surrounding privacy (Ess, 15). Privacy is interrelated with human’s autonomy and intertwined with other values. Johnson analyzes the importance of privacy as an individual good, as a social good and threats it faces in today’s society (Johnson, 2009: 84-101). Private information is difficult to be protected; technological capabilities may allow the information to be accessed and distributed without consent.

News and Commercialize: Another issue is publishing the advertisement as news or let the advertisers intervene in the news content. Those damage the duty of the journalists’ commitment to truth.

Plagiarism: The use of another person’s intellectual product such as text, photograph without consent and without referring the original source is plagiarism. The “ability” to copy and distribute in electronic environment may cause the disrespect and violation of intellectual property rights. This issue also may create problems for accuracy and reliability.

Digital Divide: Worldwide, instant, interactive communication capability contributed to democracy enhancement. But, the opportunities which ICT provide does not include all people. Freedom of expression and participation are important features of democracy but there are more. Equality is also a crucial one. People should have equal to reach opportunities but not all people are able to use digital tools. Digital divide/ digital gap is the divide between have and have not’s, the gap between people who have/use ICT and the people who don’t have/don’t use ICT¹ (Internet World Stats, Usage and Population Statistics 2014).

4. ETHICS and ETHICAL APPROACHES

Ethics refers to the principles and values related with right and good which guide the decision/ behavior. Ethics, which is a discipline of philosophy, is the “science of moral action” (Pieper, 1999: 22).

Ethics is the basis of action. In today’s society, most of the decisions are being made and most of the actions are being practiced through / with information and communication technologies. In today’s interconnected and interrelated global society, how people communicate generate very important consequences. Therefore, speedy and interactive communication conduce the responsibility of the parties who are involved in communicative action.

Ethics is not a set of strict rules, bans, or punishments. Ethics is the wisdom and art of searching the most appropriate, the good and the right.

As adults, our discourse and actions depend on our choices and decisions. Those decisions are not coincidental. There is a life behind. Our life experience and what we learned as good and bad since our childhood lead and direct our thoughts and determine what we say, how we act, react or stay passive. The principles and values which are the base of the behavior are accumulated through life time; starting in birth environment,

¹ As of 30 June 2014 World Internet Usage Statistics:

	Internet Penetration	Share in World Int. Usage Population
Africa	% 26,5	% 9,8
Asia	% 34,7	% 45,7
Europe	% 70,5	% 19,2
MiddleEast	% 48,3	% 3,7
N. America	% 87,7	% 10,2
Latin America/ Caribbean	% 52,3	% 10,5
Ociania/ Australia	% 72,9	% 0,9

(Internet World Stats, Usage and Population Statistics)

family-friends-school-teachers-neighbours-culture-country-mass communication tools-art products-the global values,... all have effects in constructing the perspectives of the person about good and bad, what is aimed to reach and to do. But the “right” way to behave for someone may contradict with others’ “right”. In that respect, the duty of ethics is to find out the common/ shared value. In postmodern era, it is observed that the values, the concepts about “good” and “bad” are vague sometimes. Most of the times, there are conflicts and clashes. Indeed, most of the humans are alike; biological-psychological features and needs are very alike. “Respect” and “grace” may save many things. The humanity and sustainability of the world need strongly to rebuild the universal values -which seem forgotten-, and meet at common goods.

The development of ethical understanding will support to find out common/shared goods. Accordingly, it is needed to constitute the clear judgement trait which requires to thrive the wisdom and conscience. So, that may pave the way to make ethical decisions and actions. Here, this reflection can be associated with Aristotle’s *phronesis*; “the capacity for practical judgement” (Ess, 2014:200). Ethical theories also enlighten in analysis of the issues and justification of the decisions. Theories such as Utilitarianism, Deontological Theory, Rights and Social Contract Theory, Virtue Ethics provide frameworks, modes of thinking and tools to use in analyzing ethical issues (Johnson, 2009: 35-51). In addition to Utilitarianism, Deontology and Virtue ethics, Charles Ess also argues about meta-ethical frameworks such as relativism, absolutism (monism), pluralism; Feminist ethics; Confucian ethics and other perspectives such as African (Ess, 2014: 200-253).

There are varied perspectives towards ethical issues in digital new media. Ess explains different approaches as one of the arguments says that there is a strong need for careful and systematic ethical reflection to develop the guidelines, codes, and laws which will help to work through especially the new kind of ethical issues that digital media evoke. Beside that perspective, there are also views which think that people will learn from their experience to utilize new technologies in ethically appropriate way in ways that minimize harm, protect rights, etc (Ess, 2014: 14). Both views seem are applicable, nonetheless there are some difficulties coming from the characteristics of the digital new media. Increasing rate of ICT and advent of Internet eased global communication, generated interactive multicultural world which refers more chance to the universal norms to be accepted. On the other hand, there may be crucial differences between understandings, norms and values sometimes which may cause to prevent solving the problems. In addition to this, there are many individuals and technical devices involved in ICT systems that it is sometimes difficult or impossible to find responsible person which is very important to solve ethical issues. Ess states that Western understandings of ethical responsibility primarily is individual responsibility. But nowadays, multiple humans and technological devices work together which can give benefit or harm (Ess, 2014: 21). Johnson also, in her analysis, points out to a variety of factors contributing to a diffusion of accountability around the development and use of computer and information technology (Johnson, 2001: 188-192).

In this effort, dialogical approach seems helpful which means trying to understand each other. However dialogical process or pluralistic view does not mean accepting all different norms and values. Justification is crucial. Basic, fundamental human values such as respect for human life and dignity, honesty, fairness, benevolence should be appropriated. The conscious and conscience seem as basic guidances. The experiment

and accumulation in history of civilization should support that base in solving ethical issues in the direction to sustainability and the progress of the humanity and the world.

5. CODES OF CONDUCT

Ethical understanding and practice are needed in every domain of life. Nevertheless, professional conduct also requires certain standards and principles.

The Principles for Internet Communication (Töreci, 2000) has properties as a guide for new digital media also. Besides, there exist particular codes of conduct for the applications on Internet and Internet journalism. Among those, The Blogger's Code of Conduct was proposed by Tim O'Reilly in 2007. O'Reilly has suggested ideas as a draft and called people to join.

Proposed ideas by O'Reilly were:

1. *We take responsibility for our own words and for the comments we allow on our blog.*
2. *We won't say anything online that we wouldn't say in person.*
3. *We connect privately before we respond publicly.*
4. *When we believe someone is unfairly attacking another, we take action.*
5. *We do not allow anonymous comments.*
6. *We ignore the trolls (O'Reilly, 2007).*

Each item has further explanation.

CONCLUSION

The ethical issues in digital media are not much different from the ones in other domains of social life. Thereby, the development of capability for behaving ethically is needed in general; for the whole life, for all the professions. Establishing an ethical understanding is related with the social, economic and cultural development of society. Ethical behavior requires appropriation of fundamental values and sound judgement, which means developing awareness and reasoning ability. Those values and standards of behavior are maintained in accordance with the society. Therefore, the economic and cultural structures also have determinative roles. Accordingly, development of ethical understanding in every area of life seems necessary. Relevant educational curriculum will support this effort. Besides, setting codes of professional conduct may function as a guide. Social consciousness and developing ethical understanding will increase awareness and good will to solve the ethical problems which also can enhance the benefits of digital new media.

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