



28 Feb 2019 New digital technology and global communication ethics

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In the emerging digital era of electronic networking and massive databases, the first challenge for communication ethics is to establish the agenda for this new media system. Collaborating on a credible agenda will help ensure that we emphasize the major issues in global digital ethics and not be distracted by the secondary and superficial. This article proposes for discussion that the ethical principles of truth, human dignity, and nonviolence have priority because they are global in scope as are the internet and cyberspace.

A new information age is taking shape, with upheavals worldwide. There are 31 billion searches on Baidou and Google every month. 350,000 years of online video are watched every day. More than 500 websites are created every second. The six billion mobile phones worldwide are the new technology leader, accounting now for 10% of all internet usage on the planet. China leads the world with more mobile phones than citizens, and this technology is similarly a phenomenon in Africa: "The unprecedented diffusion and pervasiveness of the mobile phone across social classes in



omnium and pervasiveness of the mobile phone across social classes in Africa remains one of the most significant exemplars of the impact of digital technologies on the continent. It has proved critical in shaping everyday life" (Mabweazara, 2015, p. 2).

In Grant Kien's book length study of mobile phones in Asia and North America, there is a "seismic shift" in the global citizen's media to transit and fluidity – what Zygmunt Bauman (2005) calls "liquid modernity" (Kien, 2009, p. 2). Our basis of knowing on six continents is now changing to an interactive, anytime, anywhere global experience with human participants the facilitators and weavers of networks instead of participants in intersubjective dialogue. The Twitter existence is everywhere always and nowhere never. The globe is being newly organized by the Web 2.0 phenomenon.

The explosive growth of the digital media gives us communication abundance but the complications and contradictions are cooling our enthusiasm. Schools teach computer literacy, while terrorists on four continents use online networks to coordinate planning. The growth of sectarianism and fundamentalism is making stable governments nearly impossible. Finance and banking are the most advanced information systems in history; they led the world into an economic depression. The new technological landscape has created unprecedented opportunities for expression and interaction, while the elementary distinction between fact and fiction erodes. The unlimited amount of electronic data is a golden resource for public information, but management techniques by governments and business redirect big data toward surveillance and consumerism.

Print and broadcast technologies become secondary when the human experience is multi-sensory and multi-networked. Digital media have distinctive features as a technological system. Every medium has its own grammar, that is, the elements enabling it to communicate. What are the properties of the online revolution? The Canadian communication theorist, Harold Innis (1951), introduces the concept "monopoly of knowledge" to describe the shifts from one medium to another. The new technologies that come to dominate – in his day, radio and television over print – are not merely additional instruments for a society to use. History shows us that the new forms of communication tend to monopolize the previous ones. They do not simply exist innocently alongside one another. The new technologies organize our time and space in a new way. We still read, listen to radio, watch television and attend movie theatres, but they have no distinctive authority



for us.

Canadian communication theory tells us that the history of communication is central to the history of civilization, because social change results from machine transformations. Therefore, those of us concerned about media ethics must apply our thinking to this new technological world, fully aware that it has its own distinctive properties that represent a shift in history – from oral to print to broadcast to digital. Thus I make this the basic question: What is the ethics agenda for this new technological universe; what topics reflect the distinctive properties of today's digital revolution?

Historically, mass communication ethics arose in conjunction with print technology that emphasized news. The intellectual roots of the news media were formed when print technology was the exclusive option, so most of the heavyweights in media ethics centred on newspaper reporting. Many of the perpetual issues in journalism ethics – invasion of privacy, conflict of interest, sensationalism, confidentiality of sources, and stereotyping – received their sharpest focus in a print context.

The technology of news systems changed in the late 20th century. With the decade of the 1990s, television became the primary source of news and information radio was vital. Even as television established itself as the principal arbiter of news, the principle of truthfulness from print set the standard for broadcast. Some research began to emerge that took visual media seriously in terms of their own technological properties. Despite the scattered efforts to make the new technology an independent variable, the content of the news profession remained the preoccupation of communication ethics.

As academic media ethics developed and was internationalized during the era of print and broadcast, technology was an epiphenomenon. Only rarely did media ethics redefine itself with self-conscious attention to the transformation in technology. The preoccupation with news in print journalism carried over into radio and television. The list of ethical issues that emerged in broadcast was not fundamentally different from print.

For communication technologies, the early 21st century is a period of spectacular growth and substantial change, with only limited intellectual resources from the ethics of print and broadcast to address them. In the digital era, a major challenge for communication ethics is to establish its agenda in terms of the distinctive properties of this new technological



system.

Following the standard categories of agenda setting: a) some issues continue ethical concerns of the past, b) some issues are new, and c) others create levels of complexity heretofore unknown. A content analysis from around the world – of academic textbooks, journal articles that survey the state-of-the-art in media ethics, and the assessments of professionals – identifies eight issues, two each from the first and second categories, and four in category three (Christians, 2019).

Identifying the ethical concerns

1) In today's preoccupation with digital, the ethical problem of social justice continues as before. Justice is the defining norm for all social institutions, including the policies and practices of media organizations. In terms of the ethical principle of just distribution of products and services, media access ought to be available to everyone according to essential needs, regardless of income or geographical location. Comprehensive information ought to be assured to all parties without discrimination.

The new technologies cannot be envisioned except as a necessity, so the issue of just allocation continues. Global media networks make the world economy run, they give access to agricultural and health care information, they organize world trade, and they are the channels through which the United Nations and political discussion flow. Therefore, as a necessity of life in a global order, information and communication systems (ICTs) ought to be distributed equally.

However, the offline inequities of print and broadcast technologies still exist in the digital era. Information technology confronts the injustice of the digital divide – understood in a narrow sense as between rich and poor (Norris, 2001), and on a deeper level in terms of social divides. The world's nearly one billion in urban slums are largely disenfranchised. Technological societies have high levels of computer penetration and most non-industrial societies do not. In fact, "the internet media do not just perpetuate social inequalities, but often multiply them. In reality, the global village is a gated community" (Debatin, 2008, p. 260).

2) Harold Innis' *Empire and Communication* (1952) identified political empire as an issue with print technology, and it remains for digital ethics today. Printed documents enabled the control of geographical space, and for Innis, strengthening the power of the political elite by print technologies was a



profound moral issue. Print enabled governments to standardize, administer and hold accountable their political regimes.

With digital technology, the empire problem means state surveillance in unprecedented terms. Six weeks after the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York's World Trade Center, the U.S. Congress shifted the Department of Justice's goal from prosecuting terrorists to preventing terrorism. Within U.S. borders, it commenced a relentless campaign to tighten security. Fearful rhetoric about the dangerous world has allowed secret information-gathering not for probable cause but for any alleged reason. In the revelations of Eric Snowden, the U.S. National Security Agency is abusively intrusive into private affairs at home and into government affairs internationally.

Expanded judicial authority to detain and profile also appeared after 9/11 in Canada's Anti-Terrorism Act, in the United Kingdom's counter-terrorism laws, and in France, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Austria, and Singapore. India's Home Ministry now has the right to monitor and decrypt digital messages whenever it considers eavesdropping vital to national security. Aggressive data gathering for surveillance, defended as necessary for the "war on terrorism", is being used by decent societies everywhere.

3) Regarding the second category, some issues result from computer-mediated technologies themselves and are therefore new. The digital news phenomenon is only possible in the networked era driven by computational algorithms. "Online Creator" is the general label, with blogger, video blogger, podcaster, microblogger, online journalist the subunits. Big-name news blogs such as *Salon.com*, *Politico.com*, and *Buzzfeed* have credibility, with search engines tending to favour these highly rated sites and leaving over 99% of blogs largely invisible. *IsraelPolitik* is a national government's weblog that enables it to hold microblogging press conferences with Twitter.

Bernhard Debatin refers to the paradox of media complexity. "Each and every increase in complexity causes a loss of transparency" (2008, p. 259). In the profusion of blogging technology, deep structures and sources are easily hidden and difficult to recover. With anonymity where is accountability and without transparency where is responsibility? The interactive character of this technology requires ethical principles that are appropriate to it, instead of following the linear objectivity of print and broadcast. The Online News Association recognizes the paradox and recommends the best practices approach instead of legal restrictions.



An additional approach to responsibility in the blogosphere is establishing codes of ethics. *Digital Dilemmas: Ethical Issues for Online Professionals* uses codes of ethics as a framework for resolving online dilemmas such as internet sources, privacy, and speed versus accuracy. Rebecca Blood included a "Weblog Code of Ethics" in the first edition of *The Weblog Handbook*. Jonathon Dube, founder of Cyberjournalist.net, maintains a code for online journalism patterned after the Society for Professional Journalists Code of Ethics. Norway's Morten Rand-Hendriksen of the "Pink and Yellow" digital media company, proposes a Code of Ethics for "Online Content Creators" that parallels the Norwegian Press Association Code. Martin Kuhn argues for a broader code that is helpful to political blogs but also credible to bloggers more generally. His "Code of Blogging Ethics" focuses on abuses that result from anonymity and lack of accountability (blogethics2004.blogspot.com).

4) Another new issue in the computer-driven digital age is global citizenship. The character of citizenship has always been a concern for public life; but the global citizen mandate for communication ethics signifies a fundamentally new era in history. As Charles Ess (2014) describes it, in a world of networked digital media that "interconnects our lives in ever-expanding webs of relationships with others throughout the diverse cultures of the globe, like it or not, we are all increasingly cosmopolitan, citizens of the world, not simply citizens of a given nation" (p. xv).

As Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006) observes, the idea of a "citizen of the cosmos" has existed since the fourth century B.C., but the concept could not be meaningfully implemented across the centuries until today's worldwide network of information has made it possible. Our ways of knowing in the era of digital media need to be redirected from our immediate and national circles to a respect for humanity's moral capacity as a whole. Our understanding of our place in the world must be broad and strong enough to match the digital media's international scope.

News media managers, editors, and reporters today need a world mind. As Stephen Ward's *Global Journalism Ethics* (2010) puts it, media professionals need "a cosmopolitan commitment to humanity" (p. 213); they ought to "pursue the good within the bounds of global justice" (p. 5). When professionals see themselves as citizens of the world, this should not be the neoliberal globe of economic strategies or the contested globe of nation states, or the confusing arena of diverse cultures and unknown languages.



Doctors Without Borders is the leader in demonstrating the global mind in an increasingly borderless world, with Reporters Without Borders expanding in size and substance. For the global imaginary, a society's ethnic languages are considered essential for a healthy planet. The media's ability to represent those languages well is an important area of professional development and for enriching communication codes of ethics.

Previously unrecognized ethical issues

There are four issues in the third category. These ethical issues are made so much more complex by the media revolution that the standard classic approaches of print and broadcasting are no longer appropriate.

5) The longstanding issue of violence in television and cinema is compounded by interactive violence in video games, and made nearly unmanageable by the 40,000 to 60,000 web-based hate sites scattered around the globe (estimate of researcher Marc Knobel of the Council of Jewish Institutions in France).

While the United States leads the world in the amount of violence on television, television programming in all parts of the globe contains excessive violence, including a high percentage of guns as weapons, and the brutal consequences only hinted at or not even depicted. For communication ethics, there is special concern about the sexual violence in video games and in music video, and the sadistic torture of slasher films delivered online to home media centres. A hideous new dimension of violence has emerged with hate speech on the internet.

While media ethics promotes the common good, violent cinema illuminates evil. Violent video games teach skills for annihilating others; hate sites are sectarian. Raphael Cohen-Almagor is undoubtedly correct that the public's most strategic action is to engage and reform ISPs (Internet Service Providers) and WHSs (Web-Hosting Services).

6) The ethics of privacy was a major moral issue during the print and broadcasting eras. Privacy was defined as the right of humans to control the time, place, and circumstances of information about themselves. Legally it meant that citizens have freedom from government control over what they themselves control. Totalitarian societies have used the near absence of privacy to produce a servile population. Jiang Zhan of Beijing Foreign Studies



University includes invasion of privacy as a continuing moral problem in China's media, with coverage of private affairs akin to reckless journalism.

But the appeal in this definition of privacy to a sacred self is not credible for the social networks of Facebook and Twitter. ICTs have increased data collection and with it the invasion of privacy. Micromedia such as podcasts, blogs, mobile phones, and social networking sites are increasingly used to publicize personal and intimate information within the so-called anonymity of the digital environment. Legal safeguards do not match the challenges of powerful new media technologies for storing data and disseminating information. Abuse of personal data by third parties, as well as harassment and identity theft, are typical side effects of data networks. Privacy as a moral good in the digital age needs new theorizing and application beyond national boundaries.

7) While definitions of sexuality differ widely across cultures, pornography is generally considered illegitimate and ought to be censored. The issues of pornography were not resolved during the eras when print and broadcast technologies were dominant, and the abundance of pornography online complicates any resolution now.

Intelligent discussion is buried under the "technological blurring of the once clear lines between the actual or the real (as primarily material) and the virtual (as grounded in diverse computational technologies)" (Ess, 2012, p. xiii). Mediated sex online is typically bizarre and oppressive. But virtual technology does not create children; it does not spread AIDS; it does not draw women into the agonizing decision to abort. The proliferating exchange of sexual images via smart and cell phones has required a new term "sexting", but whether it needs more laws is debatable. Sexting nude photos among teenagers is typically considered harmless fun but not immoral; when is it cyberbullying and, therefore, of no redeeming value?

The pornography and censorship debate faces a fundamental question: Does online pornography presume that real persons are communicating or does it represent this argument: "What happens is all just pixels on a screen, radically divorced from real persons in the real world, and hence nothing to be concerned about" (Ess, 2012). In this virtual-real debate, for example, what ethical judgments are valid regarding virtual child pornography? Digital ethics has a complicated dualism to overcome. It needs a third way between the virtual and personal.



8) The ethics of representation faces the demand to specify how gender, ethnicity, and class are symbolized in networked cyberspace. Multiculturalism in the era of broadcast technology was a key socio-political issue. This issue continues in the digital, complicated by the contradictory trends of cultural homogeneity and resistance to it. Digital media technologies are globalizing rapidly, but local identities are reasserting themselves at the same time.

For communication ethics, the integration of globalization and multiculturalism is the extraordinary challenge. Contrary to an ethnocentrism of judging other groups against a dominant Western model, other cultures are not to be considered inferior, only different. For multiculturalism, the communication ethics that is legitimate is not rigid and formal, but respects the diversity of the human race even while seeking commonness among peoples everywhere.

Conclusion

At this historic juncture of computer-driven big data, with its specific media tools such as Renren, Twitter, Sina Weibo, Facebook and Friendster, identifying the core issues has priority. Agenda lists around the world include the eight items summarized above: social justice, empire, blogging, global citizenship, violence, privacy, pornography, and multiculturalism. But a definitive agenda is needed, one that advances agreement on the major issues and where to concentrate our teaching and research. I contend that when serious work is done that accounts for initiatives in ethics worldwide, an agenda of three major principles emerges that are explicitly global and make media ethics intellectually sustainable. These three issues for media ethics in the digital era – truth, human dignity, nonviolence – encompass the whole technological range from Twitter to ICT's. These ethical principles are theoretically substantive and international, multicultural, and gender inclusive.

In Media Development's project of internationalizing communication ethics, the West's rational being is considered parochial for a global age. A thin parochial ethics is obviously inadequate for confronting today's global technologies. While media ethics historically has depended on the ethics of rationalism, this version is not viable for establishing a universal foundation in a global world of structural change. The autonomous individual is the core idea in print and broadcast ethics.

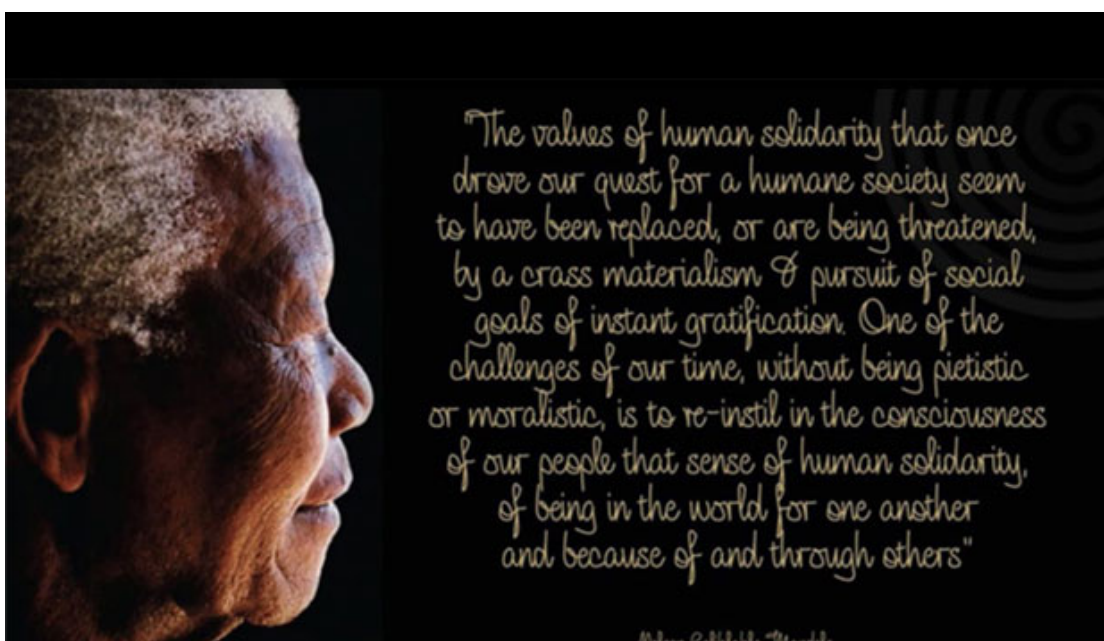
But for digital technology, both concepts need to be turned on their heads. Instead of the individual autonomy of ethical rationalism, ethics begins with




its opposite – universal human solidarity. This enables us to start over intellectually with the holistic notion of humanity's distinctiveness, rather than a truncated concept of rational individualism. It is held together by a pre-theoretical commitment to the sacredness of our common humanity. In reflecting on this underlying perspective, three ethical principles emerge from it: truth telling, human dignity and non-violence, each of these principles grounded in the purposiveness of life.

These three principles are not metaphysical givens, but propositions about human existence. Rather than abstract and absolutist, they are historically embedded and can therefore be identified by such research strategies as comparative studies of media systems. The three principles entailed by universal human solidarity, highlight the distinctive character of any society and are the basis for distinguishing the human community and virtual networks from each other.

In the digital world of fragmentation and its unrelenting conflicts, we face a monumental challenge in producing a legitimate communication ethics. On the theoretical side of this difficult task, we need to be certain of our moral foundations. Without a defensible conception of the good, our social practices are arbitrary. Without fundamental norms and the ethical principles derived from them, how can we argue that ransacking the earth's ecosystem is evil? On what grounds are terrorists condemned for trying to achieve political ends by violence? Intercultural conflicts among communities, and disputes between nations, need principles other than their own for reconciliation. The political power that protects outrageous government corruption ought to be contradicted by moral power.



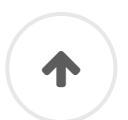


Societies can continue to debate gun violence, immigration reform, trade policy, economic disparity, and racist nationalism – but need a rational foundation for our moral convictions to avoid being hopelessly inconclusive. Media ethics must define the central issues but also determine the authentic grounds of ethical standards. If no such grounds exist, what can the public accomplish? Without a commitment to norms that are beyond one’s own self-interest, moral claims are merely emotional preferences. Without ethical principles on behalf of human solidarity, history is but a contest of arbitrary power.

With a philosophical and theological foundation in place, the difficult choices can be made more responsibly. The ethics of truth, human dignity, and nonviolence hold the promise of establishing a universal foundation in a global world of structural change. The global principles become a crucial step toward a communication ethics that is actionable and pluralistic.

Czechoslovakia’s playwright and president, Václav Havel, understood more clearly than most of us that today’s historic juncture requires a new vision cosmic in scope. “We are rightly preoccupied,” he said, “with finding the key to ensure the survival of a civilization that is global and at the same time clearly multicultural” (Havel, 1994, p. 614; cf. 1989). We fret over the possibility of “generally respected mechanisms of peaceful coexistence” and wonder “on what set of principles they are to be established.” Many believe that this central political task early in a new century “can be established through technical means....But such efforts are doomed to fail if they do not grow out of something deeper, out of generally held values” (Havel, 1994, p. 614; cf. 1997). In Havel’s terms, appeals to international forums for human rights are meaningless if they do not derive from respect for “the miracle of Being, the miracle of the universe, the miracle of nature, the miracle of our own existence” (1994, p. 615).

An agenda for the digital age of truth, human dignity, and nonviolence contributes to Havel’s project. Through human solidarity rooted in a universal reverence for life, we respect ourselves and genuinely value the participation of others in an increasingly technological age where “everything appears possible, but almost nothing is certain” (Havel, 1994, p. 614). Collaborating on a credible agenda will help ensure that we emphasize the major issues in



global communication ethics and not be distracted by the secondary and superficial.

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