

Ethics

The Ethics of Cyber Relationships

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1. INTRODUCTION

In little more than a decade, the internet has affected the way we exchange information, do business, conduct research, start (or end) friendships, socialize, have sex, and shop. Like any new technology, it offers us both challenges and opportunities as it becomes part of our daily lives. The internet will have both good and bad social consequences, and it is our task as users of this new technology to try to take advantage of its virtues without succumbing to its temptations. This new technology has already generated a multitude of ethical and legal dilemmas and controversies. Questions about security, privacy, censorship, the ownership of information, gambling, and pornography loom large in most discussions about the ethical and legal quandaries of cyberspace (Berlind, 1994; Branscum, 1995; Hauptman, 1994; Ley, 1994; Maglitta, 1994; Szofran, 1994).¹

While these issues are important--and they certainly have occupied the media's spotlight--perhaps the most important questions about the net are more subtle and harder to grasp than these "flashy" topics. These questions concern the internet's effects on interpersonal relationships: How are interpersonal relationships affected by the internet? Are people who have these relationships likely to be more (or less) trusting, truthful, caring, and kind? Will the internet turn us all into social pariahs or will it help us develop social skills? Will the emerging cybersociety be morally better or worse than our current one?²

While I cannot hope to answer all of these questions here, I would at least like to explore these topics and point out some features of internet communication that we need to discern if we are to understand its impacts on interpersonal relationships. I believe that the internet can have both positive and negative effects on interpersonal relationships, depending on how we decide to use it. We can use the internet to enhance or degrade human relationships, to build up or break down our moral values, to create either an ethical or unethical cybersociety.

2. THE INTERNET AND OTHER COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGIES

Before exploring questions about the ethics of interpersonal relationships on the internet, it will be useful to compare this new technology to other forms of communications technology, such as the Phoenician alphabet, the printing press, radio, the telephone, and television. The internet actually is a combination of two older technologies, the computer and the telephone. It is

a network of interconnected computers that uses telephone connections to allow people to transfer information over their personal or business computers. Although there have been local computer networks for many years, the internet is global in its scope, connecting people all over the world in one vast, computer network. People can use the internet to send electronic mail messages, have one-on-one or group conversations, form discussion groups, publish newsletters or essays, send photographs, advertise, establish electronic posting boards, transfer reams of data, play virtual reality games, the list goes on. In a sense, there is nothing "new" about the internet. There is nothing you can do on the net that you cannot do with a telephone, a printer, a fax, a camera, or your voice. But there are some important differences between the internet and other forms of communications technology that we should notice before reflecting on the ethics of cyberspace relationships.

A. QUANTITY OF INFORMATION. The internet allows people to transfer immense quantities of information. You can have access to libraries and databases all over the world through the net. You can send your friend or colleague an entire book over the net.

B. SPEED. The internet is fast, much faster than mail. People now refer to regular mail as "snail mail."

C. ACCURACY. The internet provides very accurate information. Internet conversations are free from the static and background noise of phone conversations. Internet photos have become almost as accurate as other was of transmitting pictorial representations.

D. COST-EFFECTIVENESS. The internet offers people a cost-effective method of communicating. Although some types of information technology are less expensive, and others can transfer larger quantities of data, no other form of communications technology can beat the internet when it comes to transferring a large amount of information for a low price. This is one reason why people who would never call a person in Hong Kong would not hesitate to correspond with them over electronic mail and why so many people in the academy and industry now do business over the internet.

E. PRIVACY. The internet offers more privacy in the sense that it allows people to interact with each other or browse through databases while remaining alone in their office or living room. You can join a discussion group without having to face all those people. You can go to library without having to find a parking place.

F. CONVENIENCE. The internet is very convenient in that it allows people to choose the time, place, and pace of their information exchanges. You don't have to wait for the library or store to open, for someone to be at home to answer a phone, or for the mail carrier to bring a letter. You can gather your information on your time, on your turf.

G. ANONYMITY. Finally, the convenience of the internet also allows for personal anonymity. You can talk to someone, send someone a pornographic picture, or break into a bank account

and no one will know who you are. This last feature of the internet leads to many of the difficult ethical and legal questions that we now are beginning to face.

Now one might point out that other forms of technology, such as the telephone, the radio, and so on, also share some of these interesting features with the internet, and this point is undoubtedly true. However, no other technology provides us with as striking a combination of quantity, speed, accuracy, cost-effectiveness, privacy, convenience, and anonymity as we find in internet communications. When you put all of its attributes together, the internet presents us with a novel form of communications technology.

3. CYBER RELATIONSHIPS: THE PESSIMISTIC VIEW

Given this sketch of internet communications, we can ask how this new technology may affect human relationships. Will it make us more or less ethical in our dealings with other people? To this point, a great deal of the discussion about the social impacts of the internet has been negative. We have learned that the internet allows people to engage in a variety of immoral and illegal activities, such as the dissemination of child pornography, gambling, stealing, fraud, libel, computer vandalism, and invasions of privacy. If we take these illicit activities as indicative of the social effects of the internet, then we may draw some very pessimistic conclusions about the internet's effects on human relationships. The internet makes people less ethical, less considerate of other people, less honest, less trustworthy, and so on, one might argue.

Why might the internet have these morally disturbing effects on human affairs? There are many reasons for this pessimistic outlook, but chief among them is the anonymity of the internet mentioned earlier. You can communicate with someone over the net and they may never know who you are or if what you are saying is true. Since you can remain anonymous, if you wish, you do not need to be as accountable for your actions (Mossberg, 1995). The internet makes it much easier to lie, cheat, steal, vandalize, or offend without getting caught. Now it is true that other forms of communications technology, such as the telephone and the mail, also offer a certain degree of anonymity and therefore also compromise accountability, but these ways of communicating cannot match the internet when it comes to convenience, speed, cost-effectiveness, and so on.

To see how a lack of accountability can have an effect on the ethical dimensions of interpersonal relationships, consider how accountability affects honesty. Honesty is clearly one of the most important moral features of human relationships in that we expect our friends, associates, family members, and many other people to not lie to us or to deceive us. Without a high degree of honesty and candor, people cannot build up trust and commitment, two of the cornerstones of interpersonal relationships. But the internet can have a very negative impact on honesty by making it easier for people to lie to each other or to deceive one another. It is much easier to lie to someone over the internet than to lie to him or her in a face-to-face encounter. Physical and emotional aspects of human encounters make it

more difficult to lie in front of a "real" person. Physical responses such as eye contact, blushing, body language, sweating, nervous pacing, breathing, and tone of voice all can be important clues as to whether a person is telling the truth. But the internet does not provide us with the physical and emotional presence of another person and it therefore makes people less accountable for their actions by making it easier to be dishonest (Rheingold, 1993).

Another salient example of the accountability problem is the use of foul and abusive language on the internet. Although there is no "hard" data on this phenomena, many internet users have complained about the insults, slander, libel, and other harmful uses of language on the internet (Branscum, 1995). Once again, the lack of a physical/emotional presence plays a role here: it is much easier to type in a nasty insult into a computer keyboard than it is to say it to a person's face. But a computer-aided insult is still an insult, even when there is no other person in the room. Likewise, the lack of accountability on the internet could have similar effects on cheating, stealing, breaches of confidentiality, and other morally reprehensible types of conduct (Mossberg, 1995). When people cannot be held accountable for their actions, the temptations to lie, cheat, steal, and perform other unethical acts become so great that people will inevitably give in to them.

Another reason why the internet could lead to ethical problems in interpersonal relationships is that it creates psychological distance between people. Psychological distancing occurs when technology allows people to interact without the benefits and burdens of face-to-face contact (Westrum, 1991). Such interactions can take place despite great physical distances among people. The internet brings about distancing in human communication, of course, and distancing also occurs in warfare, crime, work, travel, engineering, business, and other important human interactions. Distancing makes it harder for people to feel empathy and easier for them to inflict suffering; it makes people less likely to form emotional bonds and more likely to feel apart from the community; it can make people less likely to identify with their peers and more likely to feel isolated (Westrum, 1991). Distancing has some disturbing implications for morality if we make the modest assumption that we learn to be moral and that we maintain our moral compass through psychological closeness (as opposed to psychological distance). I would guess that it is psychologically much easier for a computer hacker to destroy a computer by sending a computer virus over the internet than it is for that same hacker to walk into someone's office and smash their computer with a sledge hammer. A person who spends every night playing around with a computer is likely to feel more socially isolated than someone who participates in a bowling league or has coffee with friends.

One might argue that this moral bankruptcy, if it occurs, would be self-limiting since it would only have an impact on people who use the internet when they are communicating with other people on the internet. There would still be a great many people who would not use the internet, and even those people who violate ethical standards on the net would not do so in their ordinary, face-to-face dealings with people. While this point is worth mentioning, it would appear to be a bit naive in that it

underestimates the internet's potential impacts on society. The number of people using the internet has increased dramatically in only a single decade and this trend toward net use will certainly continue (Ley, 1994). This trend is likely to continue because the internet has many important advantages that we noted earlier, such as convenience, cost-effectiveness, speed, and accuracy. It is not at all unrealistic to expect that the internet will be as common as the telephone or the mail some day. We also have no good reasons to believe that people who act unethically on the internet will nevertheless follow ethical standards in their face-to-face, human encounters. Ethics is not simply something one does "on the side" or in some special circumstances; ethics involves all aspects of our character development and behavior (Pojman, 1995). Immoral conduct on the internet could easily infect the rest of society because unethical behaviors learned in one domain will also be practiced in other domains.

Thus, the prognosis for cyber relationships and the cybersociety is not good, on this pessimistic view. The internet could threaten the very fabric of our society and some of our most deeply held moral values. The cybersociety that emerges from widespread internet use might be a collection of unethical, unsympathetic, uncaring, isolated, untrustworthy and untrusting, dishonest and disrespectful human beings.

4. CYBER RELATIONSHIPS: THE OPTIMISTIC VIEW

But there is an alternative, less gloomy forecast that we should consider. It is quite possible, one might argue, that the internet's negative impacts will be less serious or far-reaching than the pessimist believes and that it may also have some very beneficial effects. Widespread use of the internet could enhance human relationships, it could bring people closer together, make people feel less isolated and more empathetic, it could make people more respectful and more intimate. Human relationships might even be more ethical in the cybersociety. To see how this more rosy scenario could come about, let's consider three hypothetical, though very realistic cases.

Case 1: Andy and Amy. Andy and Amy both work in demanding professions and have few opportunities to socialize during the day. At night they both go home and engage in "net chat" in various internet discussion groups. One day, they both happen to be "net chatting" and they decide to exchange electronic mail addresses. They start having long conversations on many different topics over the internet, they exchange pictures over the net and call each other on the phone. After having a very close and meaningful net relationship, they decide to meet each other "in person." They live 1000 miles apart, and Amy agrees to come and visit Andy for a week. They meet in person, and their relationship grows stronger. Having gotten to know one another on an intellectual level as good friends, they develop the physical and emotional aspects of their relationship. Andy visits Amy for a week, they continue communicating over the internet, and eventually they get married and live together.

Case 2: Scott and Greg. Scott and Greg were good friends in high school, but they both went to different colleges, moved out

of town, and drifted apart. They kept track of each other through an occasional postcard or greeting card. But one day they exchange Email addresses and they renew their friendship.

Case 3: Maude, Mirna, and Mickey. Maude, Mirna, and Mickey are three neurobiologists living hundreds of miles apart who are all interested in the same area of research, the neurobiological basis of fear. They learn about each other's work over an electronic home page and they eventually agree to co-author several papers. Although they do their experiments in their own laboratories, much of their background research, brainstorming, and writing occurs over the internet. They become good friends as well as colleagues, and they now spend much of their time together at conferences, workshops, and informal meetings.

Case 4: Tom and John. Tom's is John's father. For many years their relationship has been marked by tolerance and mutual respect, but nothing more. One day, John mentions his interest in computers to Tom, who is already a computer enthusiast. They start corresponding over the internet and their relationship become closer as a result.

Case 5: Ronda. Ronda is very depressed and is contemplating suicide. One night she is poised to take an overdose of sleeping pills and she decides to declare her intentions on a net chat group. She receives many words of encouragement from her fellow chatters and they manage to talk her out of it. She eventually pursues psychological counseling and does not kill herself.

Case 6: Jill and Tony. Jill and Tony meet each other through a net chat group and develop a friendship. Jill is a 30-year-old white, Jewish woman; Tony is a 75-year-old, Protestant, black man. They meet each other "in person" and continue their friendship despite racial, religious, and generational differences.

These are but a few of the kinds of success stories made possible by the internet. In each of these cases, people use the internet to bring out their better moral characteristics instead of giving in to temptations. Technology can sometimes make us psychologically close instead of distant (Westrum, 1991) and it can enhance our moral values rather than degrade them (Volti, 1995). People can use the internet to get to know one another, to collaborate on projects, to help each other, to establish new relationships or renew old ones, and to overcome racism, sexism, ageism, and other biases. Even a person who spends each night net chatting is probably much less isolated than someone who simply sits at home watching television. At least the net chatterer is engaged in meaningful conversations with other people, even if he remains in his own home.

However, each of these success stories could easily have turned out differently. Andy and Amy could have lied to each other over the internet, they could have taken advantage of each other, and so on. Maude could have stolen Mirna and Mickey's ideas. People in the chat group could have caused Ronda to commit suicide through indifference or sarcasm.

Indeed, one might argue that the internet success stories could not happen apart from a pre-existing climate of honesty, trust,

and other moral values. It is only because Andy and Amy are already honest, trustworthy human beings that they could go ahead and use the internet to develop their relationship. If the net chat group had not already been caring, compassionate people, then it is quite possible that they would have not helped prevent Ronda's suicide. The internet cannot help us develop moral values if we do not already have those values in place. It can bring out the best in people, provided that people are already inclined to use it for good purposes.

But if we accept this line of argument, then it also follows that unethical activities on the internet do not occur in a vacuum either. People will only use the internet to commit immoral acts if they already lack honesty, kindness, integrity, respectfulness, and other moral virtues. The internet will only bring out the worst in people if people are already inclined to use it for bad purposes. If we accept the familiar slogan, "Guns don't kill people; people kill people," then we should infer that "The internet does not lie, cheat, or steal; people lie, cheat or steal."

5. CONCLUSION: RESPONSIBILITY AND CAUTION

The previous paragraph brings us to the key point in this essay and its natural conclusion: we must take responsibility for the way we use the internet. We can use it to reinforce and develop our moral values or we can use it for immoral ends. The social and ethical impacts of the internet on our personal relationships depend more on our responses to this new technology than on anything else. The internet is not an autonomous, out-of-control, monster that will destroy our society nor is it a technological answer to all of our social problems. It is simply a tool that gives us great power but also great responsibility (Volti, 1995; Westrum, 1991). In order to exercise this responsibility, we need to know how the internet works, how it can affect our interpersonal relationships, and how we can use it enhance and promote our moral values.

In understanding the internet's potential uses and abuses, we need to keep in mind that it is a novel and powerful kind of information technology that presents us with tremendous temptations. We need to understand these temptations and take steps to prevent people from giving in to them. Just as the presence of handguns in a society makes it easier to kill people, the presence of a sophisticated information technology makes it easier to lie, cheat, steal, vandalize, and violate other commonly accepted ethical rules. Just as hunters, marksmen, and other gun owners have an obligation to promote responsible gun use, internet users have an obligation to promote responsible net use. Net users should help make the emerging cybersociety an environment where honesty, trust, empathy, respect, and other moral values govern internet relationships. The moral standards that currently apply to "ordinary" relationships should also apply to cyber relationships. I close with a maxim for net users: If you shouldn't do something in a face-to-face encounter, then don't do it on the net.

NOTES

1. By 'cyberspace' I mean roughly computer aided human experiences and activities, such as "communicating in cyberspace," "drawing in cyberspace," "shopping in cyberspace," etc...A 'cybersociety' is whose members perform many activities and have many experiences in cyberspace. A "cyber relationship" is a relationship that occurs (at least in part) in cyberspace.

2. I will use the words 'ethics' and 'morality' more or less interchangeably in this essay, although I recognize that many writers distinguish between ethics and morality. See Pojman (1995).

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