ETHICAL ISSUES AND INTERNET

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Abstract

We live in a world of increasing communications that simplify our lives but also create new forms of dependence. In this new world of communications, it is important to reflect upon the accompanying ethical issues that concern individuals and societies. Firstly, the new society is created by the new forms of communication. Secondly, one of the most revolutionary means of communication of the last decades is the Internet. Thirdly, there are certain main ethical principles that should guide our reflections. Finally, there are some important special issues that should be seen in an ethical perspective.

Keywords: *virtual world, the new media, globalization, Internet, ethical principles, special ethical issues.*

I. A SOCIETY OF NETWORKING

"As more than just a technological revolution, today's revolution in social communications involves a fundamental reshaping of the elements by which people comprehend the world about them, and verify and express what they comprehend". The mass media are introducing a kind of revolution in human society. They are reshaping the elements by which people understand the world and themselves. Each epoch has a particular understanding of reality and today we have the peculiar understanding of reality and this understanding is a key factor in making right decisions. The understanding of reality now passes through what we call the "virtual world". The continuous relation between the real world and the virtual world is a new fact that needs a systemic study at a social, psychological and philosophical level.

"The constant availability of images and ideas, and their rapid transmission even from continent to continent, have profound consequences, both positive and negative, for the psychological, moral and social development of persons, the structure and functioning of societies, intercultural communications, and the perception and transmission of values, world views, ideologies, and religious beliefs". Not only is the perception of the world changing, but also the perception of the values and the correspondent ethical vision of reality. The consequences are both positive and negative. A fact that occurs in one part of the world is known after just a few minutes all around the world and becomes part of the news everywhere. We are receiving so much information that we can have the impression that we can't assimilate all we receive in so different fields and that we need a critical perspective regarding what we receive and what we want to assimilate and incorporate.

"Reality, for many, is what the media recognize as real; what media do not acknowledge seems of little importance. Thus de facto silence can be imposed upon individuals and groups whom the media ignore". From a philosophical point of view, the construction of reality, done by people is fundamental to their behavior and the conception they have of society. This influence also touches the fields of ethics, religion and the sphere of the personal conscience. The new means of communication gives us the possibility of grasping reality in a new original way that can transform societies for good or, on the contrary, separate them from reality, creating a kind of gap between the real and the virtual.

We have to recognize that we live in this new world and that every one of us receives the profound consequences of the media in our psychology, in our way of understanding morals, in the way the societies are structured and in the perception and transmission of values.

Certainly, society has received a strong positive influence of mass media and of new media, that are tools for education and cultural enrichment, for commercial activity and political participation, for intercultural dialogue and

understanding. They also can serve the cause of religion. Yet, there is another side of the coin. Communication media that can be used for the good of persons and communities that can be used to exploit, manipulate, dominate, and corrupt.

The new media have contributed to create what has been called globalization. We live in a global world, an interconnected globe "humming with electronic transmissions, a chattering planet nestled in the provident silence of space". This is an irreversible process in which we all live, and we are bound to experience it in different ways. This situation raises an ethical question: "All these media contribute to authentic human development?" Are they good for us as human beings? Are they helping us live better our vocation, mission and destiny? Do they develop what is good for our nature? We can't set aside ethical issues when we speak about mass media. Not in a moralistic sense that doesn't help anyone, but in organizing and using these powerful tools for the good of individuals and societies. All these media are in themselves positive for culture, information, progress, cultural enrichment, commercial activity, political participation, intercultural dialogue and understanding between cultures and people, and also for the cause of ethics and religion. But, at the same time, some ethical issues arise regarding how to best use these means, which can also be powerful tools of destruction and human ethical degradation, if used without the consideration of the ethical perspective.

II. INTERNET

"The Internet is the latest and in many respects most powerful in a line of media – telegraph, telephone, radio, television – that many people have progressively eliminated time and space as obstacles to communication during the last century and a half.It has enormous consequences for individuals, nations, and the world". We can say that the Internet has changed the way of living of mankind in the last decades. We could define Internet as a *network of networks* that consists of millions of private, public, academic, business, and government networks, of local to

global scope, that are linked by a broad array of electronic, wireless and optical networking technologies. The Internet carries an extensive range of information resources and services, such as the inter-linked hypertext of the World Wide Web (WWW) and the infrastructure to support email". The other means of communications are shaping themselves to change into the Internet system. Newspapers, books and other print publishing are adapting to Internet technology or are reshaped into blogs and web feeds. The Internet has enabled and accelerated new forms of human interactions through instant messaging, Internet forums and social networking. Internet has also increased the business and trade, the new form of financing.

This 'new' system in fact dates back to the cold war years of the 1960s, when it was intended to foil nuclear arrack by creating a decentralized network of computers holding vital data. Decentralization was the key to the scheme, since in this way, so it was reasoned, the loss of one or even many computers would not mean the loss of the data. The commercialization in the nineties of what before was national US program resulted in the incorporation of this system into virtually every aspect of human life.

"The Internet has a number of striking features. It is instantaneous, immediate, worldwide, decentralized, interactive, endlessly expandable in contents and outreach, flexible and adaptable to a remarkable degree". Internet has put information at our fingerprints. We can have an immense amount of information in a few minutes or seconds. We can have information about almost everything from the local traffic, maps, medicine, law, philosophy, and religion. And this information is for everyone, creating an egalitarian society. With modest technical skill and equipment it is possible to connect the whole world, send a message to the world and receive from it. In a certain way, it removes isolation, but at the same time the communication is not strictly personal but passes through different intermediary stages that users don't control. It is possible to conserve anonymity, but at the same time you can be detected by the people that manage the transmission of information.

You can be active, sending information and messages, or only passive in a kind of "narcissistic,

self-referential world of stimuli with near-narcotic effects".

Internet can help people go out themselves, but at the same time can put them in a fantastic and unreal world.

Internet opened a new realm, the marvelous land of cyberspace, "where every sort of expression was allowed and the only law was total individual liberty to do as one pleased". But the question is whether it is ethically right to put every sort of material on the internet including those that are contrary to human dignity. The radical libertarians support this position, and this way of thinking remains influential in some circles that defend the Internet as a market in which you can sell every kind of goods, and give voice to every kind of expression, no matter how vile or destructive it might be.

It is clear that the explosion of information technology has increased our communication capabilities and that Internet can serve responsible people to promote freedom and democracy, to broaden educational and cultural horizons, promote integral human development, to foster dialogue and to help people escape from isolation and poverty. "The free flow of images and speech on a global scale is transforming not only political and economic relations between peoples, but even our understanding of the world. It opens up a range of hitherto unthinkable possibilities" and can create what Popes Paul VI and John Paul II called the civilization of love.

But we also know that the Internet, like every other human reality, is ambiguous, because the same forces that lead to communication, can lead to isolation and division. The Internet can unite people, but can also divide them and foster suspicions between groups, nations, cultures, religions and races. We know that it can be used for aggressive purposes, almost as a weapon of war. That's why some speak of "'cyber-terrorism'. "It would be painfully ironic if this instrument of communication with so much potential for bringing people together reverted to its origins in the cold war and became an arena of international conflict".

III. SOME FUNDAMENTAL ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

In every ethical judgment it is important to consider some main ethical principles that later can be applied to concrete situations. I want to remind you two main ethical principles that are like the lighthouse that guides our actions.

1. The respect for human dignity

The first ethical principle, valid for any other situation in human life, is the respect for human dignity. "The human person and the human community are the end and measure of the use of the media of social communication; communication should be by person to person for the integral development of persons". A person can't be treated as a means, but always an end. This dignity comes from the fact that the person possesses spirituality a capacity to transcend conditions of space and time through intelligence and freedom. By this dignity man surpasses the world of mere things. As Gabriel Marcel puts it, existence does not involve a problem, but a mystery. "Man is not deceived when he regards himself as superior to bodily things and more than a speck of nature or a nameless unit in the city of man". He regards himself as superior to bodily concerns and " he plunges into the depth of reality whenever he enters into his own heart. This dignity, according to the monotheistic religions and to classic Western philosophy, comes from the fact that human beings are endowed with a spiritual and immortal soul.

2. The common good

The second ethical principle to be considered is search for the common good, defined in Vatican II as the "sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily". People that, in one form or another, collaborate in the media, should always have presented that they should seek not only their personal interest but the common good, the "whole of those worthy purposes to which a community's members commit themselves

together and which the community exists to realize and sustain".

These two principles reinforce each other: seeking the good of individuals as human persons is seeking the common good, and looking for the common good means having an interest for individuals. Promoting the common good is fostering a special virtue, "solidarity", which is not a vague feeling of compassion or a shallow distress at other people's troubles, but a "firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all", as put Pope John Paul II in the Enclytical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*. As a matter of fact, Internet and other social networking can foster this virtue of solidarity, which is at the core of the ethical issue in the process of globalization.

But globalization is not an automatic promoter of solidarity: "Globalization, which has profoundly transformed economic systems by creating unexpected possibilities of growth, has also resulted in many people being relegated to the side of the road: unemployment in the more developed countries and extreme poverty in too many countries of the Southern Hemisphere continue to hold millions of women and men back from progress and prosperity". Globalization offers many advantages, but also can create new problems and for some countries, "especially the disadvantaged, experience this as something that has been forced upon them rather than as a process in which they can actively participate".

The process of globalization should go hand in hand with the interest for the common good of humanity; this is especially difficult in a world where there is not a political recognized authority. The negative aspects of globalization also have their impact in the field of communication, but at the same time communication can help promote work for the common good. "Use of the new information technology and the Internet needs to be informed and guided by a resolute commitment to the practice of solidarity in the service of the common good, within and among nations". Mass media, and especially the Internet, can help every person everywhere be "a partner in the business of the human race".

IV. SOME SPECIAL ETHICAL ISSUES

Even when new media and Internet are not a source of problems, but of benefits to the human race, there are also some ethical questions that are at stake: privacy, the security and confidentiality of data, copyright and intellectual property law, pornography, hate sites, the dissemination of rumor and character assassination under the guise of news, and much else. I will concentrate my reflection on four important issues: privacy and confidential data, social aspects, culture and freedom and its relation to truth.

1. Issues related to privacy and confidentiality of data

One issue to which people are very sensitive is the right to privacy. People have the right to protect their own private life without interference from outside. The advent of the Internet and of the social networking has put it right at the centre of new reflection. In the Internet era your personal life and your activity in the Web are registered and can be stored forever, even when the user doesn't know anything about it. People's personal data on the Internet are very important for their personal career. "Microsoft reports that 75 percent of U.S. recruiters and human-resource professionals now do online research about candidates, often using information provided by search engines, social-networking sites, photo/video-sharing sites, personal web sites and blogs, and Twitter", and also that "70 percent of U.S. recruiters have rejected candidates based on Internet information". More and more people do inquires about individuals through social networks. Some experts say that commonly used devices map every move of their users.

Internet privacy can be defined as "the ability to determine what information one reveals or withholds about oneself over the Internet, who has access to such information, and for what purposes one's information may or may not be used". Web users can discover that many of the web sites they visit, collect, store and possibly share personally identifiable information about them. Similarly, although many email users "generally consider their emails to be private

and hence would be concerned if their email was being accessed, read, stored or forwarded by third parties without their consent".

In the electronic era, privacy is one of the biggest ethical problems. Internet has created the idea that it is possible to find in the Web everything about people> But being inside the Web your information is available for others that are tempted to do commerce with you. This wasn't the information that people were thinking of when they called this the information age. We have to find technical methods to prevent privacy and at the same time, according to national and international regulations, allowing in some special cases the access of governments or police to some information for national and international security.

Some people think that with Internet, privacy is over, is dead. It is true that many problems arise, for example, the possibility to be identified, the storage of material, the use that other users make of personal pictures, information etc. A new awareness fo the need to protect personal and institutional privacy has arisen in the past decades. If a general agreement exists about the need to protect privacy in Internet, many more questions rise about the practical and technical aspects for doing that and about the national and international laws that should combine the respect for privacy and national and international security.

2. Issues of social ethics

The new media also present some point of social ethics like the so-called digital divide and the relation between them and the global economy. The digital divide is "a form of discrimination dividing the rich from the poor, both within and among nations, on the basis of access, or lack of access, to the new information technology". The possible ethical danger is that the new media could separate more and more the rich from the poor instead of uniting the economical and social differences. To avoid this divide, ethics invite individuals, groups and nations to promote access to new communications technologies in order to share the benefits of globalization. This implies working to expand the use of new media and to make them more accessible to all, avoiding new forms of discriminations and seeking that cyberspace can be "a resource of comprehensive information and services available without charge to all, and in a wide range of languages".

Another important ethical issue in the social field concerning the use of the Internet and new media is the relation between them and the global economy. There's no doubt that Internet is a kind of a new global market. The ethical concerns stem from issue of social justice, avoiding situations where a "wealthy elite controls science, technology and the planet's resources" and controls the poor. Internet and other communications platforms should guarantee equal access for all categories of nation, race, sex and religion, to the benefits of the new media.

3. Issues of ethics and culture

Internet is creating a new globalized culture in the world. Internet helps to "instill a set of cultural values-ways of thinking about social relationships, family, the human condition – whose novelty and glamour can challenge and overwhelm traditional cultures". Internet offers a free space for dialogue, a new kind of open international *agora* or forum in which cultures, religions and ideas can be presented and heard. But at the same time the danger is that everything is offered there without ethical or critical evaluation, and that all the ideas, religions and philosophies are presented as being the same, without an objective critical view, fostering new forms of relativism.

Another ethical question is the possibility that the new media have the role of imposing cultural models that imply a kind of a critical domination of certain ideas that result in damaging the person or the common good of societies. Some models of Western society concerning family life, marriage, life itself could be sold to other cultures creating a kind of radical and widespread crisis of these fundamental values for society.

The culture of dialogue that Internet can promote should, at the same time, have a profound respect for "cultures and historical and creative expression" and foster what serves to preserve the unity and communion between people, nations and cultures.

4. Issues of freedom and truth

The Internet promotes freedom of expression and the free exchange of ideas. This freedom is a fundamental brick upon which to construct democracies and one of the most fundamental rights. Man, provided he respects the moral order and the common interest, is entitled to seek after truth, express and make known his opinions… he ought to be truthfully informed about matters of public interest". Freedom to express ideas and attitudes is a pillar for every democracy. In this sense, Internet and social network can be essential tools to create new democracies as we have seen recently in the so-called Arab spring time revolutions.

To speak with openness you need a forum. "The development of digital social networks which are helping to create a new 'agora', an open public square in which people share ideas, information and opinions, and in which new relationships and forms of community can come into being. These public spaces foster new forms of dialogue and debate that can reinforce the bonds of unity between individuals and peoples and can facilitate a true communion, if the communication is sincere, because, "in these spaces, it is not only the ideas and information that are shared, but ultimately our very selves".

But having a forum is not everything. We need speakers, as well as people who want to communicate and bring services and information to others, in the common desire to search after truth. The ideology of radical libertarianism is mistaken and harmful – not least, to legitimate free expression in the service of truth. When truth is exalted to such an extent that an absolute, which would then be the source of values, then the inescapable claims of truth disappear and yield their place to a criterion of mere subjective impression, leaving no room for building an authentic community and searching for the real and true common good.

Unfortunately some countries' public authorities block access to information to their citizens or manipulate it through propaganda or disinformation. Authoritarian regimes are the worst offenders in this regard, but problems could also exist in other political regimes.

Freedom of expression is strongly related to the search of truth. People freely exchange ideas in order to seek together for what is true and what is good for human persons. There is the right for privacy, but there is also the right to the truth. In this sense, every ideological manipulation of information or interpretations of reality that are not merely subjective but offend the truth, should be considered as a lack of ethical responsibility.

V. CONCLUSIONS

An important question arises in using the new media: "Are the media being used for good or evil?" The answer to this question depends on the users but also on the conditions international authorities and private enterprises create around them.

The Internet was born in a more fluid society in which people wanted to avoid rules and external restrictions, but a kind of ethical regularization is needed to put some minimum of order in all this ever more complex world. "The solution to problems arising from unregulated commercialization and privatization does not lie in state control of media but in more regulation according to criteria of public service and in greater public accountability". Along this direction, some private companies have elaborated codes of ethics that can play a useful role if private and public authorities really want to apply them seriously. In some circumstances state intervention is needed through special legislation and advisory boards that represent the values of community.

In this field, much more international cooperation is necessary to establish mechanisms and international laws that can promote the international common good, prevent digital divide, increase cooperation in the respect for privacy and foster rules for international security. Public authorities should study how o guarantee the privacy of law-abiding individuals and groups "without keeping law enforcement and security officials from exercising surveillance over criminals and terrorists".

At this international level, one can think of creating schools and other educational institutions

and programs for children and adults that "provide training in discerning use of the Internet as part of a comprehensive media education including not just training in technical skills – 'computer literacy' and the like – but a capacity for informed, discerning evaluation of content".

Ethics in Internet and new media is a concern of everyone, and not only of private companies working in the field and public authorities. All users of the Internet are obliged to use it in an informed, disciplined way, for morally good purposes".

We don't have to fear Internet or new media. They represent an enormously valuable contribution to human life. They can foster "prosperity and peace, intellectual and aesthetic growth, mutual understanding among peoples and nations on a global scale". They can also help the same fundamental questions: "Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?".

Internet and social media are a reflection of what man is. They are not only a virtual world. They are a mirror of humanity. We find in them what man can create and make. "The digital environment is not a parallel or purely virtual world, but is part of the daily experience of many people, especially the young. Social networks are the result of human interaction, but for their part they also reshape the dynamics of communication which builds relationships". The more we understand man and his nature, and the dignity of being a person, the more we can direct all these splendid means of communication and communion to the greater common good of individuals and communities.