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The Impact of Technology Induced Anonymity on Communications and Ethics: New Challenges for IT Pedagogy

Robert A. Saldarini [*]
Bergen Community College
New Jersey, USA

Eugene M. DeRobertis [**]
Brookdale Community College
New Jersey, USA

Abstract

This exploration was a phenomenologically inspired description and interpretation of the social impact of information technology. The authors argue that the perceived anonymity of on-line interactions diminishes the sense of responsibility that is experienced when communication occurs in-person. When the face is inaccessible, potentials for unethical comportment are opened up due in no small measure to the burgeoning of perceived anonymity. Transgressions, facilitated by cybernetic distancing and the anonymity that it yields, constitute a new E-ethics dimension. Though anonymity is periodically characterized as the essence of one's personal privacy, it is the authors' contention that privacy and anonymity can be viewed as relatively distinct dimensions of human existence. The perception of anonymity can provide the means for invasions of privacy. Privacy is understood as a guarantor of individuality while anonymity strives toward the absence of personal identity. To be sure, the impact of a technologically induced feeling of anonymity has generated a "new self," one that will continue to expand in the 21st century. In the past societal issues were not content items in technology syllabi as most information and computer science courses focused solely on the transformation of data. However, technology curricula can no longer exclude the social dimension of information technology impact.

Keywords: Technology induced anonymity, e-ethics, social impact, phenomenological description, on-line self, IT Pedagogy, IT course content.

Introduction

Since the advent of the Internet and subsequent introduction of the World Wide Web in 1992, technologically mediated communication has been undergoing a growth rate of geometric proportion. E-mail, Internet-Relay Chat, Web pages, image postings, voice files, and bulletin board postings comprise the overwhelming majority of on-line human dialogue. As primarily linear text processing, current communication technology has quickly beckoned the creation of personalizing characteristics such as emoticons. With comparable haste, the term "flaming" has been coined whereby loaded and biased language, insults, and derogatory humor offend the

reader. Both the necessity of personalization techniques and the emergence of flaming bear witness to the fact that there is a certain shortcoming inherent in this new communication forum. Many of the subtleties of human expression cannot arise when talk is mediated by one's processing platform. Perhaps more importantly, this distancing has the potential to generate an inflated sense of empowerment through increased anonymity. In effect, the would-be individuals become "sender" and "recipient." It is the authors' contention that the perceived anonymity of on-line interactions diminishes the sense of responsibility that is experienced when communication occurs in-person.

Communications and Ethics

Among the more penetrating critiques of electronic anonymity are those carried out and inspired by Hubert Dreyfus (Dreyfus, 1999, 2001; Prosser & Ward, 2000). The depth and breadth of Dreyfus' analyses far exceed the scope of this work; nonetheless, his work is highly relevant and worth noting. According to Dreyfus, the anonymity of being increasingly "computer mediated" has a cumulative effect of truncating one's sense of what is relevant in "real" life. The overall thrust of his work is that substituting telepresence for embodied human relations constricts one's potential for learning from the risks, sacrifices, and role modeling experiences that arise within face-to-face relationships. Having "the whole world at your fingertips," so to speak, is viewed as appropriating an artificial abstraction of a world, a world that levels off one's sense of personal responsibility and accountability to others. Dreyfus' point is illustrated by the person who, in the midst of an on-line chat, would casually hit "ignore" to halt a communication when they would most likely not simply ignore a person in a real life encounter. The ultimate risk, according to Dreyfus, is that a pervasive cyber-distancing (and resultant anonymity) would embattle certain central tasks of adult human development: making commitments in real situations, affirming others in their unique value as individuals, and thereby finding meaning in one's interpersonal relations.

To begin assessing how electronic communication can be used to enable unethical behavior, one may turn to the philosophical work of phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas. According to Levinas, the cornerstone of ethical human conduct is face-to-face engagement. This dialogue, in its true form, is not reducible to any visual representation of another person (e.g., the representations appearing on one's computer monitor). Rather, only discourse that is not detached from its author opens one to the unique and infinite value of another person. In his words:

> The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes! When one observes the color of the eyes one is not in social relationship with the Other. …The face is not "seen." It is what cannot become content, which your thought would embrace; it is uncontainable, it leads you beyond." (1985, pp. 85-87).

For Levinas, in-person communication possesses a certain ethical potency. The face has a forbidding character about it that protests the exercise of self-centered actions and awakens conscience (Peperzak, 1993, p. 64). Given that on-line communications increase detachment from each respective author, one ought to be mindful of the temptation to carry out ethical transgressions under the cover of facelessness. For when the face is inaccessible, potentials for

unethical comportment are opened up due in no small measure to the burgeoning of perceived anonymity. To quote the renowned psychologist Rollo May (1958):

> The anonymous mode…is the mode of the individual living and acting in anonymous collectivity, such as the dancer in a masked ball or the soldier who kills and is killed by individuals whom he does not know. Certain individuals seek refuge in this mode as a means of escaping or fighting their fellow men; the latter is the case with the authors of anonymous letters…" (p. 122).

In its most benign form this sense of anonymity can result in nothing more than an insult to a reader, yet its power and potential can culminate in the spread of viruses, fraud or sabotage, for example. These transgressions, facilitated by cybernetic distancing and the anonymity that it yields, constitute a new E-ethics dimension. Illustrating this point, the American Society of Chartered Life Underwriters & Chartered Financial Consultants and the Ethics Officer Association sponsored a study to explore the role and impact of technology in today's work environment (1998). E-ethics violations served as a major emphasis within the research. The findings showed that 45% of those surveyed engaged in at least one or more of the 12 unethical actions identified within the questionnaire (e.g., copying software for home use, using office equipment to shop on the Internet for personal reasons). Of particular relevance were the results showing that one in six employees agreed with the statement "traditional standards of right and wrong are no longer relevant." By adding those who identified that they were unsure, the total sums to one-third of the respondents.[1]

E-ethics violations are experienced by the cyber culture in a variety of contexts. Without the identifying nature of a face-to-face dialogue, informal day-to-day discourse achieves a certain sterility that can open up the possibility for lapses in E-ethics. This experience of detachment can become license for a release of accountability. As the pseudo-empowerment increases, individuals may seek to push the boundaries of social propriety. Consequently, gross disrespect as demonstrated by insults, obscenity, and threats to authorities such as teachers and employers has elicited a nationwide trend of creating acceptable use policies of email communication in schools and businesses alike.[2]

Ironically, anonymity is periodically characterized as a positive phenomenon in today's literature on technology and ethics. Anonymity, it is held, is the essence of one's personal privacy (e.g., Wallace, 1999; Electronic Privacy Information Center, 1999). Interest in privacy issues has been growing as of late due to the insight that this vital constituent of mature selfhood is being threatened by information technology. Lucas D. Introna (1999) writes, "…Privacy is central to autonomy. Surveillance… would tend to locate the locus of control outside the employee, and in doing so keep them in a state of dependence and 'immaturity.' Simply put: what you gain in control you lose in learning." Introna's thoughts are expressive of the modern

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[1] For more information regarding this study, contact The American Society of CLU & ChFC, 270 south Byrn Mawr Ave., Bryn Mawr, PA 19010-2195.

[2] For a particularly thorough example of such a policy, see the University of Georgia's policies on the use of computers at http://www.uga.edu/compsec/use.html

concern that unwanted access to private information is becoming an ever more difficult lapse in E-ethics to prevent.

It is the authors' contention, however, that privacy and anonymity can be viewed as relatively distinct dimensions of human existence rather than synonyms. Indeed, as will be shown, the perception of anonymity can provide the means for invasions of privacy. Privacy is understood as a guarantor of individuality while anonymity strives toward the absence of personal identity. Thus, we tend to speak more often of one's right to privacy rather than one's right to anonymity. Conversely, the editors of the *Utne Reader* raise a new ethical concern in the form of "demming" where private details of one's life are compiled in order to force individuals into abstract demographic classes and categories. For example, Weiss writes, "Some critics object to the whole 'pigeonholing' process, which assumes that clustered people share the same habits, tastes, and opinions" (*Utne Reader* Editors 2000, p. 54). Their concern is how this blurring of individual differences is changing the modern sense of self (2000, p. 47).

To be sure, the impact of a technologically induced feeling of anonymity has generated a "new self," one that will continue to expand in the 21st century. An online-self that exists in the arena of the cyberspace has been unleashed with a potential to behave in a way that is ethically suspect. Mattas Curry (2000) notes, for example, that pedophiles use the Internet as a source of discovery and expression reinforcing negative arousal patterns (p. 21). This article, "Net Provides New Expression For Sexual Offenders" cites Alvin Cooper, Ph.D., of the San Jose Marital and Sexuality Centre as commenting that such sex offenders find the anonymity of on-line interactions to be the Internet's most attractive feature (p. 21). Many find it startling to realize that 24 hours per day, seven days a week, virtual rapes occur in rape chat. In a variety of fashions men and women participate in this activity, either directly by contributing to the role-play or as "lurker" (i.e., a passive on-looker). Even psychologists who are optimistic about the potential of on-line anonymity to enhance self-exploration acknowledge such inherent dangers (e.g., Murray, 2000, pp. 17-18).

Derogation of E-ethics is not restricted to attacks on person. Transgressions under the veil of anonymity spread into a variety of areas protected by law. One of the more popular violations occurs in the area of intellectual property. The United States Supreme Court ruled that the Internet was protected by the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution (Reno v. American Civil Liberties Union, 521 U.S. 844, 117 S.Ct. 2329, 1997), thus making it an absolute open forum for information exchange. This protection tends to become a rationalization that copyright law does not apply in cyberspace. Coupled with the insincere sense of freedom offered by feeling anonymous, capturing and using images, downloading music, as well as adopting text with complete disregard to ownership proliferates. For example, the publication of the dramatic photograph of Elian Gonzalez being seized by gunpoint from a bedroom closet resulted in the creation of a mock Web site employing the Budweiser "Wassup" advertisement. This was done all in the name of "fun." Caught by the Associated Press, the two individuals referred to themselves not by name and location but as "just to schmucks who thought something was funny." They appeal to the masses to continue the violation by placing at their site, "before we had to pull it from this site plenty of other people copied it, for themselves and plastered it all over the web. We'll do our best to point you to their sites, we will also try to [point] you towards

anyplace where this train wreck is being talked about…" (http://www.geocities.com/elian_true /ap.html).

Criminals who perceive themselves to be anonymous on-line assault wealth and property in the form of fraud, financial deception, and theft of service as well. The Net itself falls victim to crime, as electronic tagging, hacking, and password stealing become the tools for illegal entry and trespass. As of November 2000, the National White Collar Crime Center and Federal Bureau of Investigation estimated that violations of privacy and credit were resulting in almost 5 million dollars of financial loss annually (Internet Fraud Complaint Center, 2000). Street crimes such as fencing merchandise, selling drugs, and fake-IDs have also found their way down the corridors of the Internet. "The eBay site has been especially notorious in this regard. Every week seems to bring a new report about body parts, babies, illicit drugs or sexual favors for sale" (Stein, 1999, p. 23). For centuries criminals have sold and transacted their business in hushed ways. In cyberspace, they achieve a higher level of empowerment as they now can conduct their illegal affairs in a faceless way.

New Challenges for IT Pedagogy

In the past societal issues were not content items in technology syllabi as most information and computer science courses focused solely on the transformation of data to information whereby the computer was the primary subject of instruction. However, technology curricula can no longer exclude the subsequent conversion of information to knowledge and then ultimately to wisdom. As humans are now part of the cyber-structure it is imperative that Internet instruction integrates E-ethics content. For the on-line population at large often perceive that they answer to no one. Thus, education and industrial training must incorporate the ingredients of proper ethical behavior when employing the use of computer-augmented communication. Training methods sensitive to the role of anonymity in electronic communication need to be incorporated into instructional paradigms to insure the appropriate application of E-ethics in technical education.

Marian Sackson (1996), in her paper entitled "Computer Ethics: Are Students Concerned?" outlines three instructional approaches: (1) teaching ethics by lecture; (2) imbue students with a sense of an ethical code of behavior by assigning readings in current periodicals and newspapers; and (3) personalize the topics of computer ethics by way of scenarios.

Depending upon how the course is structured, the instructor should incorporate lecture material dedicated to the exploration of anonymity. The teacher must provide content that provides the students with the knowledge that enables them to compare and contrast the concepts of privacy and anonymity; thus, clearly establishing that these terms need not be synonymous. With equal rigor, this important issue should be threaded throughout many lessons, as anonymity plays a key roll in many violations of ethical behavior. Yet, it is important that the instructor allots time for focused attention on exactly how online communications generate anonymity as well. Related work in this area is readily available on the Net. In preparation to introduce these issues, the instructor may select from the abundance of research under the heading of "Netiquette." Students must learn in the primary lesson that when they are on the Internet that "people who send abusive, offensive, or off-topic E-mail must take responsibility for their own words and actions" (Johnson, 1998, p. 15).

Following Sackson's model, the continued proliferation of crime via the Internet provides an almost insatiable pool of resources for students studying in this area. Although implicit in her writing, Sackson assumes that most of this research is done in traditional library style; however, it is recommended that the student be encouraged to apply the very technology that acts as the tool enabling the unethical behavior. Students should be encouraged to visit sites that provide information regarding illegal and unethical behavior as it relates to this topic. Creditable sources, particularly those with an ".edu" suffix like the one provided by the University of North Texas' Criminal Justice Department (http://www.unt.edu/cjus/media.htm) may be given as a springboard to facilitate accurate and reliable information. The authors recommend that students create either a manual or electronic journal where they can document findings, discuss their perceptions and articulate their views. On a larger scale, the instructor can create a classroom bulletin board where students can post their findings and pose questions to their peers.

Capitalizing on Sackson's idea of using of case studies, whereby anonymity is the focal point of the scenario, would allow students to expand their personal interpretations and perceptions of enlisted events. Additionally, Pena, et al. (1999) suggest that many students benefit from debates on ethical and legal matters. The aforementioned Elian Gonzales controversy can serve as a case and point as the instructor sets the stage, allowing students to choose their position, i.e., in favor of the intellectual property law or the nameless and un-locatable authors. When time permits, engaging student involvement on a contemporary event via debate or panel will not only focus on the issues under study but will also provide a forum whereby students can examine their own preconceptions, thus assisting in values clarification.

Instructional content cannot be myopic in favor of the law as victims themselves need be addressed. As is the case with all moral education, students stand to gain little if their training is non-inclusive of what may be more rightly called sensitivity training. While it is evident that students of technological ethics need to attain an understanding of both the nature of E-ethics transgressions and the ways in which these violations occur, educators run the risk of having their efforts to prevent unethical computer use backfire when instructing the unsympathetic student. Rather than preventing lapses in E-ethics, one may actually provide unfeeling students with new ways to wreak havoc and ultimately hurt others. Thus, in order for the student of technological ethics to benefit from E-ethics training, their education must include lessons that will propagate empathy for the potential victims of cybernetic maltreatment. In order to do this, their ethics training ought to include an emphasis on perspective taking.

Students themselves must feel how it is to be deceived. It is common practice and often open to debate that instructors of distance learning courses create and enroll a phantom student in their class. In defense of the phantom many advocates stress that it assists in directing appropriate discussion within course chat rooms at the cost of a "minor deception." The authors have not taken a position on this issue. Nonetheless, in the event that the reader would be utilizing this morally controversial method of instruction, the incorporation of a similar phantom situation may be used in an online exercise to demonstrate the effects of anonymity. The instructor can create a chat exercise as a lesson whereby students are placed within a private chat channel. Students will mask their true identity by taking on their own screen personas. To decrease any potential hurt or embarrassment on the part of the student, the instructor should announce that he or she would moderate the channel. Yet, the deception occurs as the teacher**,** who appears not to participate,

enters in some anonymous way. As the class engages in chat, the instructor's name heads the list as it appears that he or she is moderating when in actuality he or she is participating. At the completion of the activity, the instructor would debrief the students and unmask. At that point, participants should be actively engaged in discussion to disclose their attitudes and sentiments regarding the experience.

Minimally, this activity is worthy of a journal entry. This practical exercise could also provide an excellent segue from theoretical to applied ethics with anonymity as the topic of exploration. The instructor may decide to further enlighten students as to the emotional and psychological impact of cybernetic violations by having students engage in the study of victimology. To this end, there are websites dedicated to victimology (e.g., http://www.unt.edu/cjus/victim.htm) as well as Internet crime (e.g., http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/publications/bulletins/internet_2_2001/welcome.html).

Concluding Remarks

The millennium years offer a significant set of new cultural challenges as the advancement of technology is a given. The complexities of these changes take an age-old means for committing unethical practices into this powerful electronic dimension. Once disguised by woolen masks and hoods, online criminals depend on similar cloaking in the form of cybernetic distancing. To maintain a pro-active force against illegal and unethical behavior users must be educated and properly trained on role and impact of technologically induced anonymity.

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* Mr. Robert A. Saldarini is a professor at Bergen Community College in Paramus, NJ. He can be reached at: Division of Business, Math & Social Sciences, Bergen Community College, 400 Paramus Road, Paramus, NJ 07652, USA. E-mail: raldarini@bergen.cc.nj.us, Phone: (201) 447-7842.

** Dr. Eugene M. DeRobertis is an instructor of psychology at Brookdale Community College in Lincroft, NJ. He can be reached at: Division of Social Sciences, Brookdale Community College, 765 Newman Springs Road, Lincroft, NJ 07738, USA. E-mail: ederobertis@brookdale.cc.nj.us, Phone: (732) 224-2401.