

# The internet, ethics and morality assignment

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The “ Information Superhighway”, or Internet, is a powerful medium for today’s information driven society. From it’s humble beginnings as a series of networks established to help the military and government share resources, it has become a place for people to engage in commerce and also for people to interact socially in both business and personal faculties. Along with the excellent opportunities for meaningful communication in this new atmosphere, the Internet has evolved as an open, democratic cyber society marked by free speech and volunteerism.

It is a community gathering place for people to share ideas, concerns, stories and opinions, and to give help and assistance to one another. (Mills-Scofield)

There has also arisen a series of problems. Whenever any major development in society is conceived, such as when telephones were introduced, problems ensue. The Internet, because of its modern nature is not really well dealt with when it comes to existing ethical and moral issues. Being that the Internet has fostered a new class of community that requires a unique category of moral values and ethical considerations.

Things are always going to be dealt with differently when it comes to any revolutionary type of medium. For instance how can the federal government regulate interstate trade when it is electronically transmitted information? It is a whole new category, how could the constitution have predicted?

Although there are many differences, The Internet mirrors today’s society to a large degree, with its blend of good and bad. Many of the issues facing the U. S. and the world, such as those related to race or gender, for example, are also issues on the Internet.

And various subcultures, such as militias, GenX and philosophical movements, are represented. (Mills- Scofield) They go on further to say, Like all societies, the Internet has its unwritten rules-its" netiquette. Last year, a law firm caused a major uproar by posting an ad for its services on 6, 000 Usenet newsgroups. That kind of activity, known as " spamming," just isn't done. Companies should convey their messages selectively and appropriately. (Mills-Scofield) the society that has developed on the ' information superhighway' is unique in its structure and features.

Nowhere else in the world can a person achieve such anonymity as on the Internet. It is a forum for all discussions. There has never been a place in the entire world where a person could publish something that is available to so much of the world. With the exception of religious scripts, nothing written has ever had such a potential audience. (Hiltz 445) With the new medium being such a powerful instrument how can the world keep up? In what ways does The Constitution, a nationalist document written in 1787, deal with the international questions of 1996?

How can information be a crime? How should someone convicted of a computer crime be punished? According to an act passed recently in the U. S. Congress, it will be illegal to provide anything that the government calls pornography on the net, where it could be accessible to people under 18. One point about the legislation that arouses curiosity is the lingering question of who actually makes the call on what is wrong and what is correct for people to see and/or experience. Who is the person who gets to put their morality into this law? How is this person chosen?

Interestingly enough there aren't laws that restrict people under 18 from driving on freeways with very risqué Calvin Klein ads along the side. If the ACLU isn't successful in its attempt to quash this legislation, which it is attempting today, the government will have more of a foundation on which they can restrict the rights of Americans in other arenas later. Once a precedent is set they do not ever let it go. Income taxes were once only four percent on the top one percent of the nation. These arenas extend far into the reaches of private life and commercial enterprise.

The price we have to pay for the legislated ethics of those in power would seem to be our very freedoms. According to Bill Clinton, the laws of America caught up with the technology of today. This statement exposes the problems with legislating morality and technology. He went on to say that, This bill has been ten years in the making. In this day and age, when technology advances at an exponential rate, how can society afford to be stifled under inadequate legislation? For the ten years that the law was "inadequate" society went along on its own and had gotten used to the freedoms it possessed.

The government has no place making double standards in telecommunications. There is little legislation, besides that which protects children and personal safety that governs society's relationships. Although the current legislation does not overtly do this, it in effect does. In the name of protecting the purity of children's minds, the proverbial toes of society have been stepped on. The government needs to stay the heck out of cyberspace. The Internet, because of its modern nature is not really well dealt with when it comes to government regulation.

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The solutions to any problems with the Internet are so complex that any legislation that could ensue might threaten to infringe upon the rights and privileges that Americans enjoy today. Virtual communities could help citizens revitalize democracy, or they could be luring us into an attractively packaged substitute for democratic discourse. (Rheingold 276) What if the hopes for a quick technological fix of what is wrong with democracy constitute nothing more than another way to distract the attention of the suckers while the big boys divide up the power and the loot. Rheingold 278) All too often the regulatory and policy mechanisms of government have been subverted by the industries they exist to control. Although this takeover has not usually been intended by the formulators of these mechanisms or the laws setting up agencies, many factors lead to this corporate domination when the regulation involves a rapidly changing area. (Hiltz 445) According to Rheingold, everything is eventually somehow commodified. The First Amendment of the Constitution's Bill of Rights protects the citizens from government interference in their communications-the rights of speech, press, and assembly are communication rights.

Without those rights, there is no public sphere. Ask any citizen of Prague, Budapest, or Moscow. (Rheingold 282) Just as the ability to read and write and freely communicate gives power to citizens that protects them from the powers of the state, the ability to surveil, to invade the citizen's privacy, gives the state the power to confuse, coerce and control citizens. Uneducated citizens cannot rule themselves, but tyrannies can control even educated populations, given sophisticated means of surveillance. Rheingold 289) This assault on privacy, invisible to most, takes

place in the broad daylight of everyday life. The weapons are cash registers and credit cards. When Big Brother arrives, don't be surprised if he looks like a grocery clerk, because privacy has been turning into a commodity, courtesy of better and better information networks, for years. (Rheingold 291) The most insidious attacks on our rights to a reasonable degree of privacy might come not from a political dictatorship but from the marketplace. But high technology is often very good at rendering laws moot. (Rheingold 294) While a few people will get better information via high-bandwidth super networks, the majority of the population, if history is any guide, are likely to become more precisely befuddled, more exactly manipulated. (Rheingold 297) Hyper realists believe that, The replacement of democracy with a global mercantile state that exerts control through the media-assisted manipulation of desire rather than the more orthodox means of surveillance and control (Rheingold 297) is the path of the future. In 1978 there were people predicting what the future was to bring. Privacy and security are well known issues. What is new ... is the indirect knowledge about individuals that can be gained by the records of an individual's activity: who the person communicates with; what types of discussion are enjoyed; with whom business is done or transactions are made; how he or she votes on issues or answers polls. (Hiltz 457) Business people first modeled their antireform communications on the familiar business letter. But as organizations grew, the special demands of internal communication led this form to evolve into another, the memo. (Agre) Today the modern memo has evolved further into a technological masterpiece called e-mail.

As technology progresses so does the benefit to commerce. Numerous benefits and advantages attend the use of virtual offices in today's climate of global competition. (Snizeli) In many ways, modern telecommuting represents a computerized version of the "putting out" or "cottage" systems prevalent in Europe from the 15th to the 18th centuries. During that time enterprising entrepreneurs would drop off raw materials at the cottages of workers, to be woven and dyed into finished cloth, for example. The resulting products were then collected and transported to market for sale, and a portion of the profits returned to the cottage workers. (Snizeli) There is already much evidence that supports the fact that the Internet has already become an integral part of the American worker's week. The U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that approximately 30% of the U. S. workforce spends an average of 6-8 hours per week telecommuting. (Snizeli) There are many valuable things telecommuting can do for commerce in this day and age. numerous companies have benefited through increased productivity and the flexibility to increase or reduce the number of telecommuters in response to seasonal or cyclical changes in business conditions. (Snizeli) he goes on to say, Telecommuting has been shown to result in productivity gains of between 15% and 20%, while saving companies sizable sums of money in office-space rentals. In addition, workers who previously found it difficult to work outside the home now use telecommuting as a vehicle to participate in the workforce. (Snizeli) With every upside there has to be a down. The downside to the whole telecommuting phenomenon is that there is a loss of the personal human camaraderie.

Potential disadvantages, to both employee and employer, include employees' feelings of isolation associated with telecommuting, expendability related to the temporary hiring of experts identified and located through Internet, and the alienation resulting from the sharing of company-owned property and equipment. (Snizeli) While "meetings" that take place using email have the advantage of convenience and side-step the scheduling difficulties inherent in attempting to find a common time for everyone to meet, such meetings are devoid of spontaneity and intensity.

The capitalizing of words (or any other email protocol) is not the same as face-to-face interaction with another person. One should not lose sight of the fact that meetings serve many purposes, other than to simply communicate and inform. One such purpose is that of creating a sense of community. This purpose cannot be achieved through virtual meetings held without the participants being physically present. (Snizeli) Even though there are pros and cons to the whole situation about telecommuting, the truth of the matter is that computers are here and telecommuting is not going to go away.

Heidi Anderson said it best, either we learn to use this stuff or we die.

Commerce and society at large are well intertwined under the protective net of democracy.. They have a symbiotic relationship and cannot be separated. Without society, commerce would be a theory, and without commerce, society would be in a poor state of being and without democracy it would all be a fantasy in a land reminiscent of Orwell's nightmares. The whole virtual community, including those who telecommute or take English classes via the 'Information Superhighway' need each other to flourish. At what cost is society willing to pay for advancement in commerce?

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Is society ready to mortgage their souls for a bit of convenience? There is an ethical vacuum in cyberspace. There have been pioneers who have explored the outer fringes of the territory called IT (interactive technology) ethics, but no systematic literature has emerged as one finds, for instance, in business, medical, and legal ethics. (Loudon) Much like Singapore has the world's closest economy to true Capitalism, the Internet has the closest thing to the free exchange of ideas. The Internet cannot and will not survive in this capacity when the government decides to invade the privacy of this global community.

Not to say that the Internet is a force that makes things happen, it simply creates an atmosphere conducive to the free trade of information. The free trade of inspiration, in fact, inspires new and innovative concepts in business, government and other aspects of life. We must watch carefully the language we use to describe how IT and society interact. It is all too common, in the public press, the business press, and the academic journals, to talk about IT as some force outside of society that causes things to happen all by itself. Empirically there is little support for this proposition, and morally it is insupportable.

We should carefully examine statements on the order of, "Computers solve problems." As scholars, we must strive to be more precise in our descriptions of these IT-society interactions. (Loudon) As far as ethics and morality are concerned, there is no established real universal standard for morality, but there are universal minimums and things built into our culture to enforce them. With the growth and onset of these new technologies there

are now more ways than ever to evade the traditional safeguards that would stop people from being immoral.

In order to preserve these minimums there is a movement to clamp down greater control over every aspect of this technological age. Unfortunately, greater control only serves to stifle business interests while only temporarily slowing down the offending people. Perhaps it is time that society realize what a dark side there is and if it is truly bothersome, perhaps there is another way to slow it down rather than suppressing it and taking everything around it down too. No person would ever tell Mr. Mars to stop making Snickers bars because a few people ate too many and got cavities.

People would simply realize what is going on and avoid them. For those who choose not to, they pay the dentist. Bibliography 1. 1. Agre, Philip E.

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