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Ethical Issues Concerning Online Social Networks

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Abstract

The unprecedented development of online social networks raises a series of questions regarding the users' ethical behaviour and also the moral responsibility of the social network sites administrators. The purpose of this paper is to make a philosophical analysis of three ethical themes treated both from the perspective of the online user as well as that of the social network sites (S.N.S) administrators. The themes are: privacy, anonymity and trust. Privacy is analysed from the point of view of philosophy of rights and from the point of view of the ethical responsibility of the site owners to protect internet user personal data. Anonymity and trust are treated together and the paper stands to demonstrate that trust can be built between online anonyms as a duty regarding respect and moral behaviour between two human beings, even if they don't know each other. The paper offers answers to these questions and describes the existent theories that deal with these three ethical themes.

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1. Online social networks and information society

Alvin Toffler offers an explanatory model of the information society we are living in. In his work *The Third Wave*, Toffler builds an explanatory paradigm based on a linear evolution of techniques and technology. Our current informational society can be defined by three waves of technological evolution. The first one is the agricultural revolution that enabled structural and ideological changes like the creation of cities and writing. The second wave is represented by the industrial revolution that has had as effects: specialized schools, development of services and the notion of new and continuous innovations in technology. The third wave refers to the information society (Toffler,

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1983). Other concepts used with the same sense as computer-dominated world are knowledge society or post-industrial society based on services. (Fucks, 2008). All these concepts are based on the fact that the use of computer and computer-mediated communication represents a fundamental part in their definition. Moor describes the information revolution or any technological revolution as having three stages: 1) the introduction stage, 2) the permeation stage and 3) the power stage. These stages characterize any technological revolution. In the first stage, the technological product will have huge production costs, the users will have limited access to it and the social impact will be low. In the second stage, the standardization process will occur. The social impact is visible and the production costs will become moderate. In the third stage the social impact will be major and it will determine a large social impact. Moor's model can be applied in the use of the personal computer. Today's society is one in which computer 'holds the power' and it seems that its huge impact will not change for a long time. (Moor, 2005)

A similar model proposed by Moor can be used to explain the online social networking revolution. Using the method of logical analogy, we can establish similarities when it comes to the structure of the web sites as being a three stage construction, as well. First stage is the unidirectional information one in which there were few web sites that handled the transmission of the information from the producer to the receiver. The second stage it the multidimensional one, in which the user can also produce information on his/her own. Blogs, forums and the possibility of posting comments on certain situations or information were developed. The third stage is that of global exchange of information. This is the stage where social media exists, in which each user has a face like a blog, and the personal information exchange is so important that it becomes a universal benchmark. It is important to mention that the part of the internet development is closely related to the extension part of the power stage that Moor described. When it comes to the third stage – the universal one, we discuss about the existence of Social Media. Trying to give a functional definition to social media, we refer to it as the interaction between people, by creating, sharing, changing and commenting social events of the virtual community and of certain social networks using specialised online sites.

A different definition of social media is given by Andreas Kaplan, for whom social media is "a series of online applications that are developed on Web 2.0 technological foundations and that allow the creation and exchange of information produced by users". This definition refers to online communication channels, to social sharing and interaction by means of which very large online communities can produce and exchange ideas, photographic and audio materials shared from one user to another. The online social networks are also part of social media. In the internet taxonomy, social networks cover a whole range of homepages and blogs, in which the user is the most important element of the online community he is member of. (Kaplan, Haenlein, 2010)

One of the definitions of the online social networking says that they are internet-based services that allow individuals: 1. to create a public or semi-public profile within a closed system. 2. to create a list of other users he/she shares a connection with. 3. to see and have access to other users' lists of connections and to those created by others users in the system. But we should underline the difference between social network sites and social networking sites. The first term refers to social sites and it is used to explain that they are rather a replica of social connections in the real world transposed into the virtual one. The second term ending in *-ing (present tense continuous)* shows that an action is taking place at the moment of speech and, within the conceptual frame of social networks, it refers to the user's actions, behaviours and reactions at the moment of the online interaction.

The ethical issues which will be further discussed refer both to the users' moral behaviour while using these web sites, as well as to the behaviour of those who manage these social networks and who make this social network phenomenon possible.

2. The ethical challenges of privacy

One of the issues of the online social networks is the one of privacy. When speaking of privacy, two major issues are raised. One involves the user's morality while accessing these online social networks and the second one refers to the information management within these systems, to the software producers, software that allows the record of posts on these web sites. Defining privacy is a difficult task, especially if we take into consideration the fact that before the first computer was developed, it had different meanings, starting with one's right to be left alone. Privacy is the individuals', groups' and institutions' request to determine when, how and to what extent their own information, which is considerate private, may be disclosed to a third party.

Another definition describes privacy as the selective and controlled access to the information that is personal. Privacy doesn't mean hiding. While the first one can be defined more broadly as the right to be left alone and the right not to disclose private information, hiding refers to blocking or withholding any kind of information. Privacy can be theorised from a dichotomous point of view. In a positive sense it means the individual's control over his/her own privacy circles, developed on four dimensions: private space in the real world, personal integrity within the psychological dimension, social interaction and personal data protection in the informational dimension. From a negative perspective, the definition of privacy could refer to the fact that the government, companies and other factors must and do not interfere when it comes to a person's private data. Information privacy refers to the control that one person has over his/her private data, thoughts and behaviour when using the internet. (Moore, 2008)

There have been identified a series of issues especially related to the privacy of information in the online environment. Among these issues, the most important are: follow up and monitoring the internet users' activity, gathering and analysing information, taking personal information out of their context, collecting users' data by governments or international companies.

The rapid development of technology led to new definitions of privacy especially in the online environment. Every new technological generation created new and challenging issues related to privacy. A social network represents a service provided through the means of the internet which allows users to create a public or semi-public profile within a limited system. A social network such as Facebook allows users to make their own web page based on their personal profile which generates the community of friends. From this perspective, social networks seem to have an oxymoronic character, meaning that their participation to the virtual world aims, mainly, the exchange of information, most of it having a private character. One of the reasons why users frequently post things on the internet is the ubiquity on the social networks, the friendship with other users and the need to prove themselves. Most of the times, users willingly disclose important personal information about themselves with the only purpose of keeping their profile as dynamic as it can be. For instance, being friend with someone on Facebook, one can find out more about that person than outside the virtual world. Information users post raise ethical problems. Examples show us that we can speak of two moral different moral behaviours. One is specific to the real world and another to the online environment. A guard from the U.K was fired because a lot of prisoners were on his friends list on a social network. A lot of the verdicts in the American courts were appealed because certain members of the jury have posted comments about the law suits that were being judged. It was considered that they were impartial when making their decision. Beyond the fact that users wish to assert them and to maintain their profile active as a sign of their virtual identity, these personal actions which seem to have no morality can end up as a punishment to the users in the real world they want to escape from. (Kirkpatrick, 2011)

When it comes to manage social networks, problems arise as a result of the insufficient practices, which are often hard to implement and which most of the times are deceiving. For instance, Facebook has privacy settings that are more difficult to set compared to other sites, which means few users will rarely take the trouble to set them. Studies indicate that social networks that have a lot of users, such as Facebook (over one billion users), LinkedIn and MySpace have major defaults when it comes to privacy issues. Privacy can be analysed from a philosophical point of view as a series of human values such as: moral autonomy, equality, justice, dignity and self-fulfilment. Privacy takes its moral value and justification from its role related to freedom and self-determination. The latter refers to the right to determine what is necessary and what is needed in order to have a fulfilled life and personal development. Self-determination is a part of the individuals' autonomy based on will from a Kantian point of view. Self-determination of free will is the basis of the moral action and a natural inalienable right. It is the principle and the right that allow individuals to have a private life and to control their personal information quantity and context. Private information can affect the right of free choice or can be used for economic manipulation purposes by addressing customized commercial messages. We can add here their use for surveillance purposes by institutional power.

Several solutions to solving the issue of privacy have been brought forward. We will refer to only three of them. The first one consists in educating users by making choices that will protect their interests. This means users must achieve personal abilities by limiting access to the information posted online. Limiting the access to this information does not mean better computer skills or a better knowledge of a social site functions, but rather an awareness of the importance of information posted on internet sites and of the way it can affect us in time. Internet information

should be seen as public because it is persistent and can be abusively copied, distributed, reproduced without its owner's knowledge or consent. We should have ethical attitudes in the spirit of the idea that posted information is not seen only by friends, but by the entire world. Limitation should be understood as a care towards the informational content made public on the internet

The second solution to solve this ethical dilemma comes from browsers developers that have created programs such as Collusion which allow users to see third parties' activity while on the Internet. The solution does not implicitly solve the issue of personal data transfer to third parties, but at least one can be aware of the other users who follow his/her online activity. Because the new technologies generate ethical problems, often the solution is technology. There is the tendency that the response to ethical issues occurred as a result of the technological development to be one given also by technology. One of the reasons for this situation is determined by the fact that ethics or ethical solutions cannot keep up with the extraordinary rhythm of the computer science progress. Technical solutions seem to be viable when it comes to issues concerning the respect of the users' rights. As Moor pertinently observed, the role of ethics begins to be taken by technology or the answers to technical challenges of technology rely on technology as well." (Moor, 2005) First of all, we need to take into account that ethics has a dynamic character. When new technologies come along there is a concern in solving ethical issues first. Or sometimes it is recommended a moratorium on technological development until ethics catches up. Both approaches are better than to sort ethical issues first, after the damage has already been made. Even so, we cannot anticipate all ethical issues that will arise as a result of technological development. When speaking about solving ethical issues by technology, we could develop a new set of ethical technologies in order to respect human rights. A third solution is given by the users' anonymity. The lack of the user's identity protects his/her personal data, his/her image and thus it reduces the role of the social network's administrator in creating privacy systems. Still, anonymity can be seen as not taking responsibility for his/her action, as a moral irresponsibility.

3. Trust between anonyms

Moral relationships cannot exist without the concept of trust. Trust is a must, we may say, an ethical need in order for a community to exist, regardless of the real-virtual dichotomous space. Trust is important in personal relationships, for the individual's good as well as for building self-trust. As consciousness is bipolar, always self-consciousness and the consciousness about others, trust is also developed on a bi-dimension by moral reference to one another. This structure consists of trusting someone, so that someone else trusts you in return. Aristotle made the analysis of trust within the concept of friendship and good will. Good will involves trust between friends. Friendship involves mutual good will, each one wishing the best for the other, and this good will should be appreciated by both parties. On the contrary, friendship means trusting each other, not being unfair to each other and all the other qualities." (Aristotel, 1988)

If one trusts someone, he/she will open up to the other person, he/she will become vulnerable in front the other in a certain way. By this open up to someone ones' trust in others becomes stronger. Trust depends on the context as well. We can trust someone in a certain context, but not in others. Trust is related to context but this is compatible when it comes to creating a trust pattern. A sees B worthy of trust in context C, but nor necessary in context D. Here is a relevant example: A trusts B to care for his children while he is away, but does not trust him when going to a party (context D), as B may not stay sober at that party. The pattern created by Wickert is applicable to some point when it comes to online trust. It is acceptable if one knows the social network user from a non-virtual environment. One knows what his/her expectations are when it comes to trust and he/she can create a certain pattern of behaviour when it comes to trust in virtual world. Problems may arise when one communicates with virtual users who he/she has not met before. The online contexts are different from the offline ones. The contexts of some social networks may be unknown and cannot generate trust in others, as it happens in known contexts. There are social networks that don't require the user's real names or address, networks in which the user who puts his/her trust meets the unknown. (Weckert, 2005)

Accessing a virtual community raises problems that are not to be neglected. For instance, Facebook has over a billion users, and each has a list of more or less 140 friends. There are also users who have over 5000 friends (the maximum admitted limit which the sites administrators allows.) How could one possibly trust them all, if some of

them have never been met in the real world? Internet is not a community in which rules are respected by all. Online communities transgress cultures, and this generates problems when it comes to trust. But the most difficult of all issues is the lack of 'bodily' presence of the human being within the social network. Corporeality has a special meaning when speaking about identity. The real bodily presence represents the basic fundament of trusting in reality. In the virtual environment one doesn't know who he/she is talking to, especially if the network permits some users to stay anonymous such as Social Number, where names are replaced by a number or in virtual world, such as Second Life, where identity is replaced by an icon. Anonymity forces one to wonder if the person behind the computer screen will act responsibly. The fact that he/she uses an image does not give him/her a guaranty of his/her responsibility towards him/her. One cannot have the certainty that the person from that picture posted on Facebook, which he/she never met outside the virtual world, is really that the person. The strongest argument is the fact that the user has absolute control over what he/she chooses to introduce to others and over the image he/she creates as virtual identity. When one has the possibility to create his/her own identity, the positive aspects will prevail over the negative ones by the mystification of his/her own image.

Trust in the online environment has a lot to do with communication and vulnerability. Dreyfus expresses his doubts about the way in which one may replace trust given by the physical presence of a person by an image which may or may not be true. From our childhood we know that trust is mainly built especially when we see a person many times, thus, trust is founded on feeling secure with those who care for us. But this experience does not exist in the online environment. "Trust partially depends on the experience that the others do not take advantage of us. One may be in the same room with someone who could hurt or humiliate him/her, but if that someone chooses not to do so, corporal vulnerability is reduced. There is no trust without a certain degree of vulnerability. (Dreyfus, 2001)

Lévinas places trust at the centre of morality, and meeting the other, especially in person, and especially the eye contact invites us to absolute moral responsibility. The experience of the face to face contact makes us see human vulnerability. Physical proximity is asymmetrical because one is responsible for the other, but the other may not feel the same. The issue of a face presence begins to make sense in the context of an ethical solution by posting profile pictures or by having web cam conversations. We can speak of a philosophy based on which an image could lead to a moral responsibility in the way Lévinas sees it. (Lévinas, 2000)

The solutions offered for this sort of issue are diverse. One of them lies in the structure of the social sites. For example, Ebay has developed an electronic system made of a data base in which the ones who log in can evaluate the integrity and the reputation of a potential partner. Any registered user can leave positive, negative or neutral comments about another user. This data base represents a sort of user's 'business card'. There are online social networks on which one can create a new account only based on an existing user's recommendation. The issue of trust rises especially when the users are anonymous. John Weckert says that, in order to build trust one needs to see the others as worthy of his/her trust. Let us say, A behaves in a way that says B is trustworthy. B has the possibility of proving that. If B behaves accordingly, things could evolve positively, even if they do not really know each other. Trust is built based on experience. Weckert proves that trust is possible if one chooses to trust another. The one who chooses to give trust must decide whether to bet on trust if the utility of trustworthy achievements is greater than the one of non-achievements.

Another solution offered in the issue of trust is that of Bjørn Myskja. Starting from the Kantian categorical imperative, Bjørn Myskja develops an interesting demonstration of trust based on human action as virtual action. Any human being must react as if a legislator member of the universal kingdom of purposes, Kant says. According to the imperative, we should affirm the human perfection through moral action. We must act *as if* the law of the hypothetical imperative could become universal. We must act *as if* the artificial worlds are real ones, and the people we meet are just like us, moral human beings. The arguments that he uses are also interesting. Kant says that deceiving is allowed in certain situations. If someone perceives us as being weak, as we really are, he/she may corrupt us. Pretending to be better is not only deceiving but it also implies being responsible by doing so. We are aware that the communication with others is not as it is, but as he/she wants to be because we pretend to be someone we are not, too. We can deceive others to protect ourselves from being judged in a negative light, but so can he/she. Trust can be built even from this hiding. (Bjorn, 2008)

4. Conclusions

There is a link between privacy, anonymity and trust. Anonymity can protect privacy because the social network user is not forced to provide his/her personal data. Also, in this situation the site administrator doesn't have any moral issues regarding the users' personal data. Anonymity can also be seen as fleeing from moral responsibility, from our actions in the social networking virtual world. Also, anonymity doesn't suppose lack of trust between users. Trust can be created as a game of chance, or as moral duty between different human beings. The relation between privacy and trust is a difficult one at the user's level because the user most of the time is unconscious about the dangers of posting personal information about him/herself. The same relation raises difficult issues on the duty of online social networks administrators about how they can use the data provided by the online users in commercial or third parties interests.

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