

New Era, New Moral Standards:
The Effect of Electronic Communications on Human Integrity

The Internet highlights both good and bad sides of human nature. As a result of electronic communications, people are better informed and can make smarter decisions, but do they? A casual observer might not think so from looking at a generic Internet chat board. People-search engines and personalized advertising are highly imaginative developments in technology, but also raise questions of privacy rights. In addition, electronic communications have opened the door to a new realm of threatening behavior, whether cyber-bullying or terrorism, and we need to take this into account as we adapt laws to fit the changing world. We are at a crossroads as we form regulations around Electronic Communications, and the Internet's moral ambiguity presents some high stakes for human integrity.

The anonymity of electronic communications has had a moral effect on free speech, in that people will often make comments on the Internet that they would never think of saying to another person face-to-face, in a newspaper, or even over the phone. By hiding behind the faceless shield of the Internet, people are much more likely to type whatever comes straight from their head, with little to no self-censorship. The question has been raised: is this really free speech? Although technically it is not against the law, it is certainly common courtesy and an implied rule dictated by society not to stand up in the middle of a performance and start screaming about your love for fresh-baked potatoes. On the Internet's various chat rooms and other anonymous sites, these implied rules seem to disappear as people show rude, vulgar, and generally despicable sides of themselves that they would probably have the courtesy not to display in everyday, face-to-face life. So is this really free speech? Is it really better for humanity if we provide a means to be utterly crass, stupid, and generally the opposite of what humans should strive to be? If only people would think before they post, just as they would (should) think before they speak in everyday conversation, we would represent a side of humanity that is much better than this insensitive, thoughtless, and sometimes outright mean side we see now. This is still free speech—all the ideas can still be expressed—but a more polite form is less offensive and therefore more likely to gain support. Part of free speech is to acknowledge the possible results of our words, and when people find themselves able to say anything without facing the consequences, oftentimes they say things they don't mean just because they can. If people really believe in an idea or a cause, they should express it openly and take responsibility for their words, rather than shielding themselves with the shadowy anonymity of electronic communication.

With this anonymity comes a false sense of privacy. However, people might be surprised to find websites such as Intelius, a search engine that in a few

seconds comes up with an alarmingly comprehensive list of information about a person just by searching a name, telephone number, or email address. Essentially, if you only know one piece of information about a person, such as email address, Intelius can help you find historical and current information about that person's name, age, phone numbers and carriers, house address, and more. Intelius claims that their people search is "Discreet, anonymous, and instant" (intelius.com). I was certainly shocked upon discovering this web service—shocked that it was allowed to exist. Certainly this was a violation of privacy. It turns out that on the Internet, pieces of personal information are considered public domain, and even though individuals may not want that information distributed for public use, unfortunately they have no control over it.

In another example, free email providers such as Gmail (Google's internet mail branch) are able to remain free because their income stems from the sale of advertisements—advertisements catered specifically to the person using the account. I am sure this has happened to everyone who uses Gmail. You have an email conversation about a movie that you have recently seen, and soon enough, ads start showing up about discount tickets to see that movie. Or you write an email complaining about the huge chemistry test you have to take next week, and an advertisement appears, promoting an interactive periodic table website. Companies will pay a great deal of money to have their ads selectively and specifically shown to the most promising audiences, and free email providers are more than happy to comply. But few people realize that the emails that they send and receive pass through a company's servers and are constantly scanned for keywords that match an ad. Individuals may notice this process and protest its legality, however, when checking that little box that says "I have read and agree to the terms and conditions" —that conveniently has a link to a separate page so that we actually have to go out of our way to read them—we agree to this specialized advertising and all that it entails (i.e., scanning personal emails for keywords). But what can be done? In modern society we need email to keep up with work and school. Pieces of our "personal" information are legally public, and there is no way to get a free email account without agreeing to those terms and conditions, including advertisements. We cannot afford to complain about privacy issues online, for with the Internet comes a certain degree of publicity. And sneaky as it might be, it is completely legal.

If civilians' information is so easy to find, one can be sure that government transparency is also much more readily available as a result of electronic communication. Official websites such as whitehouse.gov's press office site provide government news but now, in contrast with the past, the government is not the only source of information. By having other reliable sources for political news, the public can make informed decisions about controversial issues. Whereas in the past, the government could choose which pieces of information to make public, now there is a much lower chance of the government's keeping a piece of important information quiet, in part because a scandal would erupt if it

were discovered and in part because of the fact that even if the government wanted to, it would be very difficult to conceal information from the persistent and seemingly omniscient media. However, with this power comes great responsibility—people constantly caught in a deluge of news and statistics need the skills to decide which sources to trust over others when the information inevitably contradicts.

The use of electronic communications means that a piece of information can go worldwide in just a few seconds; therefore we must be extremely careful of what we post. With the world's population more informed about current events, individuals can make smarter decisions about what is best for themselves and for their countries. Being bombarded with instantaneous knowledge can be slightly overwhelming, but overall, people are more satisfied by a great deal of information than by carefully manipulated pieces of information released few and far between. This satisfaction with the amount of information released by and about the government leads to an increase in the population's trust in the institution. For even though what the government is doing may not be exactly what one person may wish, the fact that the government trusts the population with information—trusts them to be smart and allows them to make their own decisions at their own risk—creates a mutual trust system based on transparency, which is surely better than an overpowering government keeping its citizens in the dark.

With the advent of electronic communications, despite the culture of trust these innovations can produce, new threats to both individuals and society have also appeared. Threats such as Cyber bullying and cyber terrorism, because of their relatively recent appearance, still lie in a sort of “grey area” without clearly defined boundaries. Though some cyber bullying cases have been tried in court, we have not yet developed a distinct set of regulations for legislating its status. Similarly, cyber terrorism is a new threat, and therefore we have not had the time to build up defenses against it as we have for other security issues. We must be wary of these internet-centric attacks and alter security measures and systems of law as technology continues to change.

Electronic communications, like most innovations, has good and bad sides to it. Ultimately the question of whether it is good or bad depends on the individual or company using it, but the fact exists that no matter how much we complain about privacy issues and online rudeness, we cannot live without the Internet. Electronic communication has resulted in a more transparent government and more available information, which in turn can lead to a smarter, better-informed population, a potential benefit to society. As the Internet exposes the good and bad in humans, electronic communication can either help or hurt us. It is something to be treated with care and concern, and not to be taken for granted. The Internet is redefining free speech, privacy, and government

transparency, and we have the responsibility to ensure that these changes to humanity are beneficial, not harmful.

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