

Lesson 9: Ethical principles.

Key ideas:

- (1) There are commonly accepted ethical principles characteristic of Western culture, with versions often found in non-Western cultures.
- (2) Many political actions and policies advocated by the disinformation proponents or politicians or governmental agencies violate one or more ethical principles.
- (3) The general domain of “information ethics” addresses ethical concerns in the sources, creation, organization, dissemination, transmission, packaging, use, and evaluation of information
- (4) “Digital ethics” has emerged to address specific issues that arise within digital media.

In addition to logical fallacies that are rampant in the disinformation marketplace, many ethical principles are violated. While there is some disagreement about the priority and number of foundational ethical principles, we can assert, at least for Western culture, that there are five common ones: (1) Respect the moral autonomy of self and others (in other words, do unto others as others would do unto you, or in Confucian terms, do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire); (2) Seek justice or fairness; (3) Seek social harmony; (4) Act in such a way that the amount of harm is minimized or, better, that existing functional relationships are maintained or promoted; and (5) Be faithful to organizational, professional, or public trust. This list is not intended to be comprehensive, and the fact is that some of these values can conflict with each other. For example, seeking social harmony or the maximum amount of happiness for the greatest number of people is sometimes inconsistent with respect for individuals: universal vaccination may infringe on individual liberty, respecting the first principle, but infringe on principle (5) by causing medical problems for the unvaccinated and the population they encounter. Yet some situations violate all five principles, such as Trump’s treatment of immigrants’ seeking asylum at the southern border. Principle 1 states that we must respect the moral autonomy of each and every human being, a principle embodied in Kant’s categorical imperative (Treat others as ends and never merely as means) and which is echoed in many religions’ precepts (e.g., many foundational sacred texts explicitly mandate care for the poor, the sick, and the stranger). Treating asylum seekers as having no rights (e.g., violating Geneva Conventions), separating children from their parents, and keeping children in dangerous and unsanitary conditions are profound violations of this principle. If we look at the second principle, seek justice or fairness, we also see violations: to ignore or delay due process of asylum claims is neither just or fair. Trump and his administration do claim that their policies will protect the social harmony of the United States (principle 3), arguing that many asylum seekers are rapists, crooks, and job displacers. However, these claims are false. The growth and happiness of the United States are, in fact, due to the inclusion and integration of immigrants, those who have come and those who continue to come. The policies also fail to minimize harm. Instead, the administration seems intent on a high level of cruelty, under that notion that it may deter immigration: e.g., separating children from parents (with no plan to reunite them), delaying legal procedures for asylum seekers, trying to prevent asylum seekers from stepping on US soil, keeping them in abysmal conditions, etc. These policies destroy functional relationships, such as those between parents and their children and other relatives (principle 4). (5) Finally, the president’s policies violate the ethical principle of being faithful to organizational, professional or public trust. To uphold his role in the public trust, the President is to uphold the Constitution, enforce established procedures for asylum seekers, and seek the common good. He fails the public trust in these and other cases.

Information ethics is the general domain that addresses ethical concerns in the sources, creation, organization, dissemination, transmission, packaging, use, and evaluation of information. It is the latter (use and evaluation) that are highlighted in these lessons. However, the packaging is also of critical concern. For example, in website creation, there is what is called “dark patterns,” explored by Harry Brignull (<https://www.darkpatterns.org/>) (Brignull & Darlo, n.d.), ways of creating a website that forces the user to take action that they would not normally do. For example, when a product-seeker goes to amazon.com, after perusing a particular product, the Amazon screen displays such information as “the following products are bought together” (including the product at hand), leading the purchaser to think that the price for the 2 or 3 items mentioned was less than the items purchased separately, when in fact it is the same products with the combined price with no discounts. We might want to add another subcategory of disinformation that we could call “dis-sonance-information” or “muddling disinformation” because while it is disinformation intended to deceive, this kind is designed to confuse or mislead the consumer: e.g., in this case, to get a bargain where there is none. Amazon.com will often assert that there are only two items left in stock, suggesting an urgency to buy, when, in fact (if it were true), most items could be quickly reordered.

Another example occurs downloading Adobe Reader to install on one’s computer in order to read pdf files. In order to get this “free software,” there is a checked box for including a download of Google Chrome as well (previously it was McAfee Anti-Virus software), which would have to be unchecked in order not to download it as well. Most users do not recognize this pre-choice or forced choice and unwittingly download it.

There is an extensive collection of concerns in information ethics that can be glimpsed at The International Center for Information Ethics (<https://www.i-c-i-e.org/>) and its journal, the *International Review of Information Ethics* (<http://www.i-r-i-e.net/index.htm>). It was created in 1999. At such sources, one can view the rapidly expanding field of information ethics and the domains that it extends to embrace.

There has also emerged a field of digital ethics, which Daniel Richards asserts, “encompasses how users and participants in online environments interact with each other and the technologies and platforms used to engage.” He adds, “An important part of maintaining a solid digital ethos is critically reflecting on your choices of online self-representation and whether or not these choices reflect your goals as a student and as a professional” (Richards, n.d.). Given a particular context, are one’s choices of self-representation or for the representation of others ethical? The basic idea is that the ethical principles that we invoke in other environments should be invoked online and on digital media such as cell phones: e.g., do not spread rumors about others that you would not have done to yourself. However, Jonathan Terrasi points out that “Personal digital ethics encompass how individual users honor one another’s right to self-determination online. What makes these unique compared to the typical ethics guiding interpersonal conduct is that, given the nature of online infrastructure, communications is almost always mediated by some private interest or third-party” (Terrasi, 2019). As noted earlier about social media, they are hosting sites in which users participate but which they do not control, though they can control what they contribute to it. If a friend sends one a photo of oneself, such photos should not be shared in social media without the consent of the friend. Terrasi contrasts personal digital ethics with corporate digital ethics, which “revolves around the practices of online platforms like social networks collecting sensitive information about users.” (Terrasi, 2019). Google, Amazon, and other large online

companies collect information about their users, and there is no clear expectation of what can and should be done with such information, including the right of users to control the data about themselves.

The Zur Institute applies the notion of digital ethics to the realm of mental health professionals, defining it as “how to manage oneself ethically, professionally and in a clinically sound manner via online and digital mediums” (Zur Institute, n.d.). The concern is whether it is ethical to use the internet or cell phones, for example, to learn about patients or clients, whether it is appropriate to friend them or how professionals should react to negative, even scurrilous, online reviews. It is easy to extrapolate these views to all professions and personal online behavior, much in the same manner as the Pro-Truth pledge, but inclusive of the application of ethical norms in digital media, often mediated by third parties. Ethics has not changed, but the field of applications has galloped in the expanded communication technologies and their effect on the environment at large. Adam Henshall suggests that there are currently three hot issues in digital ethics. (1) Is computer code an instance of speech and regulation? Lawrence Lessing argues that computer code is a form of regulation, but not in a favorable sense. Rather than promoting more freedom, Lessing believes that “as this code changes, the character of cyberspace will change as well. Cyberspace will change from a place that protects anonymity, free speech, and individual control, to a place that makes anonymity harder, speech less free, and individual control the province of individual experts only” (Lessing, 2016). (2) A second issue is how much social and governmental control will be relegated to computer programs, whether we will move to a future where computers may be largely in control, given that the computations may be so complicated, their recommendations cannot be adequately assessed. Furthermore, (3) how do we combat digital monopolies, such as Google, Facebook, Amazon and Apple? (Henshall, 2018). This third concern echoes issues of corporate digital ethics, mentioned by Terrasi. While these large issues will have consequences which we must address, for this lesson, it is important to focus on what we can do immediately: personal digital ethics or professional digital ethics – acting responsibly in the environment of digital media, not to mention to engage in and promote media literacy and information literacy.

Exercise suggestions will call on participants to consider the following questions:

- (1) Can you find specific instances, actions, or policies of politicians or the government that violate one or more of the given ethical principles? Give details about the case, actions, or policies (with source documentation, such as URL) and explain precisely how specific ethical principles are violated.
- (2) Consider Eric Reiss’s presentation on “the Ethics of AI” on YouTube dealing with ethical issues in website creation, particularly tricks in getting the user to do or buy things they do not typically want to do, (what are called “dark patterns”):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAARKi8v0ps&fbclid=IwAR1Y9LQp9yKrMPQXJ7Gpbuv7NXtARI13ghr1zZpEebmSdcrmPKvLuapmt6o> (28 minutes, but quite enlightening). Alternatively, check the web site, <https://www.darkpatterns.org/>, created by Harry Brignull, in particular, consider <https://www.darkpatterns.org/types-of-dark-pattern>. Discuss the “dark patterns” that you have encountered in your interactions with websites. Be specific in your response.
- (3) Check out the site for international information ethics at <https://www.i-c-i-e.org/> and its journal, the *International Review of Information Ethics* (<http://www.i-r-i-e.net/index.htm>). Pick out a particular theme and discuss key ideas: e.g., the domains the field contains, the internet of things, etc.

- (4) If you were embracing digital ethics, what postings would be permissible on a social media site? What postings would be unethical? Be specific in your responses.