The New Frontier of Mobile Communication Ethics

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INTRODUCTION

Mobile communication pertains to all receptive and expressive functions enabled by a smartphone, whereas *mobile communication ethics* encompasses communication motives and means and ends, which can all be viewed using ethical lenses (Johannsen, Valde & Whedbee, 2008) related to all cellphone applications. Additionally, *mobile communication ethics* may be more simply understood as a generic system of acceptable and unacceptable communication behaviors (Allen 1990), applicable to smartphone communications.

*Mobile communication ethi*cs emerged as a branch of technoethics following the global diffusion of cell phones as communication affordances in the 1990s (Luppicini, 2008). As Tenner (1977) noted, new technology is often initially greeted with enthusiasm, as demonstrated in the initial euphoria expressed regarding the obvious merits of cellphone technology (Fox 2001; Nyri, 2005), until its dark side emerges much later (Tenner, 1977). Among the pioneers of cellphone ethics research are American authors Dr Joseph Coates and Dr Jennifer Jarrat (Coates & Jarrat, 1990), Dr James Katz of the University of Rutgers (Katz, 1999) and Dr Richard Ling of the University of IT Copenhagen (Ling, 1997). Whilst these pioneering scholars continue to dominate the mobile communication ethics research landscape, others most notably Dr Charles Ess of the University of Oslo (Ess, 2009) and Dr Naomi Baron of American University in Washington (Baron, 2008) have produced relevant research prolifically as emerging leaders in the new scholarly field.

OVERVIEW

This chapter will thematically review existing international research on cellphone communication ethics. The primary focus will be on empirical observations. In addition, philosophical ethics will be discussed, including consequentialist, deontological and normative perspectives as conceptual backdrops. Emerging ethical issues of cross-cultural mobile telephony will also be addressed.

The major ethical evaluation of cellphone communication in this suggested chapter is guided by the team work of Stahl, Heersmink, Flick, Hoven, Wakunuma, Ikonen and Rader (2010) who have developed a simple framework to help in the ethical analysis of a communication technology. This framework includes history and definition, essential features, applications, relationship to other technologies, attendant ethical and other relevant issues in connection with the technology in question, as found in the literature on the subject. Mobile communication ethics is discussed as it is related to different forms and contexts of communication.

CURRENT SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

Interpersonal Communication

Perhaps the biggest ethical challenge, brought on by mobile communication, has been in interpersonal contexts. Of the different forms of unethical communication behavior, deception has been shown to be a pervasive issue in human communication (Buller & Burgoon, 1996; DePaulo, Ansfield, & Bell 1996; Burgeon & Qin, 2006). Hancock, Thom-Santelli, & Ritchie (2004), indicate that individuals report one or more lies daily. These findings must be interpreted cautiously though since the frequency of prevarication is generally understudied (Serota, Levine, & Boster, 2010). Based on this, an important question arises, "how is digital communication technology, and more particularly smartphone use, related to deception?" In other words, how rampant is digital deception?

Hancock (2007) has defined digital deception as "intentional control of information in a technologically mediated message to create a false belief in the receiver of the message." Studies on the consequences of individual communication technologies seem to support the feature based model, which stipulates that synchronicity, record-ability, and co-presence, predict digital deception (Hancock, 2007). In a study by Hanccock, Thoma-Santelli and Richie (2004), participants lied more telephonically than in face to face interaction, which modestly validated an earlier study (Depaulo et al., 1996). However, the absence of a significant difference between short message service (SMS) and face to face interaction lies, calls for further enquiry using more diverse and larger populations than reported in the student based studies.

Recent studies have looked at deceptive texting and location disclosure. Birnholtz, Guillory, Hancock and Bazarova (2010) reported that SMS was used to start or terminate interactions using lies, which the authors call "butler lies." It was indicated that the purpose of these lies were to protect a relationship using impression management and the ambiguity that texting, as a lean medium, involves (Birnholtz et al, 2010). A study conducted by Smith, Birnholtz, Reynolds and Hancock (2013) on the temoral dimension of texting shows that SMS sent in late evenings and early mornings tend to be lies. These lies included avoiding location disclosure to comply with social decorum or interpersonal expectations. In his Nigerian study, Ojebode (2012) reports that location lies are routine and primarily serve as a face saving purpose of the liar, as may be exemplified by presence in the wrong place. Lies may also be engendered by cited connectivity problems, which explain away failure to make, receive or prolong a call. This is a situation that may be exploited in countries with less than perfect telecommunication infrastructure.

Lies may also occur when a call is received while in a collocated interaction, in which the remote caller may be perceived to be less relevant. In fact, the callee in a collocated interaction may engage, as is normally the case, in a consequentialist analysis or deontological reflection, minding as internal conversation or role taking as espoused in symbolic interactionism (Charon, 2004) before ignoring or responding to a call. The callee may also utilize general communication competence, defined as "the degree to which individuals perceive they have satisfied their goals in a given social situation without jeopardizing their ability or opportunity to pursue their other subjectively more important goals" (Parks, 1985, p. 175), which may take us to the idea of interpersonal strategic communication (Sanders, 1987) as opposed to affinity seeking and maintenance communication (Daly & Wiemann, 2013).

Ethical issues surrounding the dilemmas of receiving or delaying a call have been addressed in the literature on context aware communication applications (Schilit, Hilbert, & Trevor, 2002). These applications were designed to better coordinate cellular communication and better manage ethical concerns arising from remote calls in the milieu

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