Moral Mediators in HCI

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INTRODUCTION

Our contention is that interactions between humans and computers have a moral dimension. That is to say, a computer cannot be taken as a neutral tool or a kind of neutral technology (Norman, 1993).[1] This conclusion seems a bit puzzling and surely paradoxical. How can a computer be moral?

All computational apparatuses can be generally considered as moral mediators, but for our considerations, computers are the best representative tools. First of all, they are the most widespread technological devices, they are relatively cheap in comparison to other technological utilities, and, very importantly, they can be easily interconnected all over the word through the Internet. This last feature allows people to keep in contact with each other and, consequently, to improve their relations. Computers require interactions with humans, but also allow interactions between humans. Since morality relates to how to treat other people within interactive behaviors, computers can help us to act morally in several ways. For instance, as the concept of moral mediators suggests, computers can help us to acquire new information useful to treat in a more satisfactory moral way other human beings.

BACKGROUND

In traditional ethics it is commonly claimed that the moral dimension primarily refers to human beings since they possess intentions, they can consciously choose, and they have beliefs. Also, artificial intelligence (AI) holds this view: Indeed, AI aims at creating a moral agent by smuggling and reproducing those features that make humans moral. On the contrary, our contention is that computer programs can also be considered moral agents even if their interfaces do not exhibit or try to explicitly reproduce any human moral feature.[2] As Magnani (2005) contends, computer programs can be defined as a particular kind of moral mediator.[3] More precisely, we claim that computers may have a moral impact because, for instance, they promote various kinds of relations among users, create new moral perspectives, and/or provide further support to old ones.[4]

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In order to shed light on this issue, the concept of moral mediator turns out to be a useful theoretical device. To clarify this point, consider, for instance, a cell phone: One of its common features is to ask for confirmation before sending text. This option affords the user to check his or her message not only for finding mistyping, but also for reflecting upon what he or she has written. In other words, it affords being patient and more thoughtful. For instance, after typing a nasty text message to a friend, receiving a confirmation message may affect a person's behavior to wait and discard the text message. The software not only affords a certain kind of reaction (being thoughtful), but it also mediates the user's response. The confirmation message functions as a mediator that uncovers reasons for avoiding the delivery of the text message. Just reading after a few seconds what one has furiously written may contribute to change one's mind. That is, a person might think that a friend does not deserve to receive the words just typed. Hence, new information is

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brought about. According to Magnani (2003), because of this behavior, we may call this kind of device a moral mediator.

Various kinds of moral mediators have been described that range from the role played by artifacts to the moral aspects that are delegated to natural objects and human collectives. In order to grasp the role of moral mediators, let us consider Magnani's example of endangered species.[5] When we consider animals as subjects requiring protection for their own existence, we are using them to depict new moral features of living objects previously unseen. In this case, endangered species can become a mediator that unearths and uncovers a new moral perspective expanding the notion of moral worth and dignity we can also attribute to human beings.[6]

AN EXAMPLE OF MORAL MEDIATOR: THE "PICOLA PROJECT"

This section will provide an exemplification of the moral mediation previously illustrated. In the following, we shall give a general description of a Web-based tool named PICOLA (Public Informed Citizen On-Line Assembly).[7] The PICOLA project, developed at Carnegie Mellon's Institute for the Study of Information and Technology (InSITeS) and at the Center for the Advancement of Applied Ethics (CAAE), aims at implementing an online environment for community consultation and problem solving using video, audio, and textual communication.

The appeal of deliberative democracy is mainly based on two ingredients: first, the idea of a free and equal discussion, and second, the consensus achieved by the force of the best argument (Fishkin & Laslett, 2003; Habermas, 1994, 1998). PICOLA can be considered a moral mediator because it implements those two ideas into a Web-based tool for enhancing deliberative democracy. Indeed, everyone has equal rights to speak and to be listened to, equal time for maintaining her or his position, equal weight in a poll, and so on. Besides this, it allows the formation of groups of discussion for assessing and deliberating about different issues. Within an actual framework, these two requirements are rarely matched. Even if everyone has the possibility to vote and be voted on, few persons can actually play a role in deliberative

procedures. Web-based tools like PICOLA promote participation by allowing all interested citizens to be involved in a democratic process of discussion. It enables citizens to take part in democratic meetings wherever one may be. For instance, with PICOLA we do not need any actual location because it is possible to conceive virtual spaces where persons can discuss following the same rules.

Every Web site has to face the problem of trustworthiness. In a physical environment, people have access to a great deal of information about others: how people are, dress, or speak, and so on. This may provide additional information, which is difficult to obtain in a virtual environment. The need for trust is more urgent especially when people have to share common policies or deliberations.

PICOLA requires each user to create a profile for receiving additional information, as listed in Figure 1. As well as a user name and password, the user must insert the area where he or she lives, the issue he or she would like to discuss, and the role he or she wants to play: moderator, observer, or deliberator. This tool also allows users to add a picture to their profiles. Moreover, each user can employ so-called emoticons in order to display current feelings.

All these features work like moral mediators because they mediate the relation among users so they can get acquainted with each other. Being acquainted with each other is one of the most important conditions to enhance cooperation and to generate trust. Indeed, people are more inclined to reciprocate and to be engaged in cooperative behavior if they know to some extent the people they are interacting with. This diminishes prejudices and people are less afraid of the possible negative outcomes. In this sense, sharing user profiles could be viewed as a generator of social capital and trust (Putnam, 2000).

Each issue to be discussed during a session is introduced by an overview that provides general information (see Figure 2 on the issue of national security). Text is integrated with audio and video performances. The moral mediation mainly occurs for two reasons. First, people are sufficiently informed to facilitate sharing a starting point and giving up prejudices that may have arisen due to a lack of information. Second, the fact that different perspectives are presented helps users to weigh and consider the various opinions available. Moreover, the multimedia environment provides video and au-

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