

Chapter XIX

The Ethics of Global Communication Online

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss important ethical aspects of online communication of global scope. We focus particularly on procedural fundamentalism as the most significant threat to free and open communication today. By contrast, it is argued that deliberation models a desirable form of communication, based in both Habermasian discourse ethics, but also rhetoric along with a plurality of communicative styles, as long as they satisfy procedural constraints of deliberation. The importance of judgments that transcend purely private conditions is discussed by reference to reflective judgments aiming at enlarged thinking - to think from the standpoint of everyone else. It is concluded that it is preferable to develop Internet technologies that stimulate imaginative powers in order to make people better informed of knowledge of counterfactual circumstances. Such knowledge may work as an impediment against fundamentalist knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss important ethical aspects of online communication on the Internet. The significance is particularly related to the discussion of fundamentalism as the most important threat to free and open communication today. The topic relates to technoethics by examining information technological impact on communication. The ethical analysis of communication technology focuses on the question

how online communication could promote open discourse in a manner that would impede fundamentalism. A sketch of an answer is offered in the final sections of the chapter.

Fundamentalism as applied in media is most often envisaged as internally linked to religion. Opposite to this view, it is argued in this chapter that we need to disconnect the conceptual linkage between religion and fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is here characterised in terms of procedural traits of communication rather than

by its particular contents, such that any values might appear to be fundamentalist, whether they relate to religion, gender, sex, ethnicity or others. This approach to fundamentalism diverges from mainstream accounts in much of the global communication of fundamentalism in media, as fundamentalism is often identified in terms of its substantive contents.

Fundamentalism might be conceived as suppression of challenges of particularity, whether a particular cultural practice or a story that is put forth with a claim to approval or condemnation without questioning. To make this concrete, we shall pay attention to a particular story from Nordic media. In January 2002 Swedish-Kurd Fadime was killed by her father in Sweden. The reason why she was killed was that she had a Swedish boyfriend. The murder was referred in media as a murder of honour, and it was seen as an expression of contest of the cultural norm forced marriage, a norm that is extensive in many Muslim societies. The murder and the debate following from it have necessitated a public reflection of a claim to participate in the public debate, and also reflection on referring to immigrants in terms of representative groups. Immigrants are often conceived as groups in the light of ethnicity, culture and identity. Additionally, these “groups” are considered to be represented by their leaders in accordance with Western, democratic principles. The contested practises of forced marriage and murder of honour do, however, separate the members within the minority societies just as well as separating minority groups from the society at large.

The murder of Fadime and the debate in Sweden and Norway following from it clearly demonstrates that Muslims in these two countries cannot and should not be defined on the basis of a uniform group concept. Fadime was killed by her father because she loved a Swedish man, and because she spoke her opinions of love and marriage openly in media. She argued against arranged marriages, in favour of the right to choose a partner of one own. We might formulate this

case as a problem concerning the relation between the particular and the general, in cases where particular arguments are considered to be justified with respect to “the others”, whereas not looked upon as acceptable “for us”. We may ask: what is it that appeals to general circumstances, and how do these appeals relate to something beyond the particular, something of universal scope?

We may further ask how to describe the case above, what description is the correct one? No matter how we describe it – as an act of murder of honour or something else – our description will on any occasion be a normative act. This is because we look for solutions to the problems that we raise. This act could be considered a murder of honour – Fadime’s father wanted to rescue the family’s honour – or it could be judged to be a sick man’s misdeed as Fadime’s sister Fidan claimed (Eriksson and Wadel 2002).

In describing this act as a murder of honour a particular appeal is thereby made to particular circumstances about a particular culture. As a result, the description might easily be exploited for both criticism, but also for justification of murder of honour, as was seen in the public debate. Whether this particular description is used for criticism or justification, it will nonetheless encourage segregation. To describe the same act as the misdeed of a sick man, does not, however, appeal to culturally specific circumstances to the same extent as the concept ‘murder of honour’ does. The fact that some people commit sick actions because they do not function well in society might strike down anyone, and it is not necessarily related to ethnic or cultural status in particular. If the act in question is considered as a sick person’s misdeed, it is turned into something for which we may raise a more general appeal. By contrast, an act that is described in terms of a particular cultural or religious norm of a particular society cannot be defended by many. The justification by appeal to a particular religious norm in this case endangers by mobilising disgust within the society at large. Appeals to particular religious/

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