

Chapter 17

Ethical Issues With the Use of Social Media in the Connected Business World

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ABSTRACT

With the dawn of social media, the world of communication and interaction changed tremendously. It transformed altogether many other aspects of life – businesses, education, philanthropy, to name a few. However, with a phenomenon of such grand proportions came the associated problems of comparable stature. This chapter deals with some of the most compelling problems which social media brought. It highlights how these problems occur, their consequences, and what should be done to minimize the effects. It is hoped that after reading this chapter the users of social media will exercise caution; the practitioners will play a more responsible role while the theorists will be able to propose novel but practical solutions to these problems.

INTRODUCTION

‘Facebook is selling your data’, ‘Social media is putting people at health risk’, ‘someone died while taking a perfect selfie’... how many a times we have read such headlines. How many more will come, one wonders! All these headlines start with the incident and end with an explanation, and maybe some conclusions based on what the companies/people should do in this regard. Is that enough? Some time later another similar news will ink the pages, spurring another discussion, availing no fruit at all. Why not nip the problem in the bud – try curtailing it where it all breeds – at the business level. If we can have business realize that they can actually play a pivotal role in addressing the ethical issues, it will actually reduce most of them. This chapter is exactly about it!

Social media is undoubtedly the biggest phenomenon of the 21st century which has affected the lives of, literally, billions of people globally. It is a part of everyday life of people, whether it is in the personal, professional, or business domain. With its myriads of options, there is virtually ‘one for everyone’. The prime purpose

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of any social media is to share contents with one's connections, get and be informed, and be entertained. In all its types and purposes, the process is common: a user creates her profile, makes connections with others, shares her contents and sees what others have shared. But with all the well-intended consequences there are its side-effects too. This chapter deals with some of the most common and perhaps most important ethical problems related to the use of social media in general. It describes how they occur and their effects. These effects are generic enough to include many similar concepts readily available in the literature.

PRIVACY

Privacy is one of the most obvious and often the least bothered about concern when using social media. While any website, mobile app, social media website, or any other online media does ask your permission (before performing an action) but how often we have seriously read whatever is written inside the permission agreement! The users typically agree to everything that is said in it as a result of the blind trust that they put into the service provider (Berreby, 2017). Often this blind agreement is also made because we just don't understand all the terminologies and the language used in the agreement and perhaps don't have the luxury of time to decipher what that alien language means. The result is often a (perceived) 'breach' of privacy where users' personal and usage data is gathered by the service provider and used for various purposes (Berreby, 2017). History has given many examples of such breach of privacy, Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal being the worst and most severe of them.

Similar to such privacy issues is the conscious and deliberate divulgence of personal information over these social media which might lead to intrusion and other more severe privacy issues. Sharing on social media is so exciting that it becomes almost impossible to resist sharing personal information on it (Steinberg, 2017). The extent of this sharing, obviously, depends on the users – some are more open to share than others. Though it might sound like innocent fun, yet in many cases such exposure of one's personal life leads to falling that data in wrong hands which might lead to bullying, stalking, and other crimes (Kleinberg, 2015). This risk is increased multiple times if this information is shared in the purview of a meme or hashtag which ultimately becomes a 'trend'.

What It Implies for the Businesses?

Experts and law enforcement authorities of any country have clearly warned against blind sharing of one's personal information on social media and have always cautioned the general public to exercise diligence in sharing personal contents. But is this warning enough to curb the situation? Apparently it is not. What the businesses need to do is to be more transparent in what they say. When an 'agreement' is made, it is important that all the parties fully understands the terms and conditions and then sign. In order for a common person to understand what is written in such agreements, it is necessary that they are written in simple, easy to understand language. This will encourage the consumers to read through the agreement and understand what they are signing up for, and later on not fall into difficult situations.

The companies also have a responsibility towards ethical business practices. Sometimes, in the urge of creating a 'trend', the companies make hashtags which ask people to post their photos or videos using that hashtag. This is a breeding ground for such breach of privacy where naïve consumers can get trapped. The businesses should take a responsibility here and not encourage people to post their personal images for promotional purposes.

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