

Chapter IV

Universal Information Ethics? Ethical Pluralism and Social Justice

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Abstract

The explosive, global diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) confronts us with the need for an information ethics that can resolve ethical problems evoked by ICTs and CMC in ways that provide shared, perhaps (quasi-)universal responses. At the same time, however, in the name of a transcultural social justice that preserves diverse cultural identities, such an ethics must also reflect and sustain local values, approaches, and traditions. Important ethical claims from both within Western and between Eastern and Western cultures exemplify an ethical pluralism that is able to meet these requirements as this pluralism represents important ethical differences as issuing from diverse judgments and applications of shared ethical norms.

Introduction: We've Got the Technology, so What's the Problem?

One of the central consequences of the exponential, if not explosive, growth of the Internet and the World Wide Web is the facilitation of cross-cultural encounters of a speed and scope that would have been unimaginable in the era of print and post. The emergence of these technologies and the cross-cultural encounters they make possible have inspired a number of responses, ranging from the rosy-eyed optimism of Marshall McLuhan's (in)famous "electronic global village" to darker views that suggest our choices are rather between a global homogenization (aptly called "McWorld" by Benjamin Barber [1995] and described as "Disneyfication" by Cees Hamelink [2000]) or "the clash of civilizations" famously predicted by Samuel Huntington (1993), as diverse cultures and peoples understandably enough insist on preserving their cultural identity and integrity—even if such preservation requires the use of violence. These diverse scenarios force upon us a central question: are there ways in which we might avoid the Manichean polarities of sheer homogenization versus fragmentation and violence—ways that, I suggest, would allow for global cross-cultural engagements that simultaneously respect and protect cultural integrity and diversity?

These larger issues and concerns are taken up in a more specific way in the relatively nascent fields of computer ethics and information ethics. In the West,¹ computer ethics traces its origins to the work of Norbert Wiener (1948, 1950) and tends to focus on the specific ethical problems encountered by professionals in computer science and related disciplines, along with central social and political issues such as privacy, copyright, and intellectual property (see Tavani [2004] for an excellent introduction and overview). The still younger but broader domain of information ethics expands the scope of computer ethics in a number of ways, so as to include, for example, classic philosophical questions of ontology and epistemology (for example, Floridi [2003]). Moreover, information ethics recognizes that in developed and developing countries "information" and its ethical dimensions directly concern other professional disciplines such as library science, and, indeed, all professionals and citizens whose lives are increasingly defined by and dependent upon information and communication technologies (ICTs).

As information ethics and computer ethics thus analyze and attempt to resolve the ethical issues entailed in the design and deployment of ICTs, they inevitably do so by taking up specific values and ethical decision-making approaches—which, of course, vary from culture to culture. At the same time, however, especially because ICTs are central engines and media for global cross-cultural encounters, information ethics and computer ethics thus face in specific ways the larger problem of how to bring together radically diverse cultures and peoples across the globe—but in ways that, ideally, will avoid the Manichean polarities of sheer homogenization versus

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