

Internet and young people: how ethical can it be?

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper to present, is the attempt to explain how much the Internet can be ethical or not, in relation to the young people. However, I think that the explanation on what consider youth, it is really important for the discussion of the problem. I consider young, all the social intervenients, whose age group is the 12-15 years, which means similar to the cognitive-development approach. In other words, individuals that don't present ideal maturation levels to conveniently notice the implications of the Internet in its future development, namely in ethical and moral terms.

I should still refer that, the analysis in cause should be approached in an interdisciplinary optic, like the social sciences advocate, that is, we will analyze a complex reality, for that, the resource to several social sciences will be fundamental for the analytical success of the issue. On the other hand, this article appears as a inevitable and even natural consequence of the previous two presented respectively in 2002 and in 2005, given that, in both situations the answers were endorsed in a positive way, but the number of questions that appeared as consequence was of such order, that this article as I already affirmed appears naturally.

What began by being in the middle of the Cold War a network for military ends and later to the academy, the known ARPANET, now Internet grew and it continues to grow in a exponential form, counting in our days with billions of users at a global level, for the that, we can affirm that, the Internet is to cause a substantive effect as the people in our society behave and they interact. For the first time, in the history of the human society, the children feel more comfortable to use a technology than their own parents, and there are important considerations to weave relatively to this subject. The networks of telecommunications and the computational technology are driving to the change that transforms our lives, but however they lack in the resources to understand as it is correlated with the ethical changes in our society. The Internet puts us in contact with the whole world, then that, a strong possibility exists of promoting strategies that allow causing damages unhappily, badly understood and even intentional skirmishes in what refer to the cultural differences.

The countless hours that the youths spend on-line it can lead to depressions and other diseases of mental forum due to the lack of significant interactions and intimate relationships with friends and family. The youths' age group that spend infinite hours on-line and limit their social interactions equally with their fellow creatures can become socially isolated, for that, the inherent opportunity to improve their social capacities disappears. Beside those quoted problems, we must have in consideration the problem regarding the cognitive dissonance due to the sociological shock. However, there is a fundamental question to put: will all the young people be affected in the same way or due the fact to belong to a certain society or geographical location won't cart different consequences? The issue to keep is clear, the on-line interaction is not the same that the traditional interaction.

In our everyday activities in social terms, that is, with other people, there are traditions or social models that govern our interactions with each individual. We probably presented different behaviours according to the social paper that we are to carry out, in other words, our behaviour is clearly different face to our boss, to a work colleague, a teacher or a friend.

When we typically deal to a person that we didn't know, our social behaviour is a little more distant, however maintaining the courtesy. However in the Internet, what is noticed is that individuals transfigured entirely, besides they present non ethical behaviours in terms of the relationship or social behaviour, especially in situations of mediated communication, as for

instance in chats or IRC's. Examples of non ethical behaviour at chat's or IRC's are: exclusion of people from different social levels regarding a certain group; obscene language; the own person's non identification; among others.

In many aspects the behaviour in the cyberspace reflects the off-line everyday behaviour, and, obviously the youths incorporate in this group of people especially because the development process in terms of maturity is not complete.

It tends in consideration all of the enunciated problems, that the governments of the developed countries have been taking measures with the purpose to minimize the ethical problems of the Internet. Those measures however generate other essential questions. When an Internet service tries to control what happens, the controversy appears, because it is seen as a censorship to thought and an attack to the rights of freedom of expression and respect for privacy. When the filters of the Internet try to control the information which people have access, a question appears. Are these filters a valuable tool to eliminate all of the ethical problems of the Internet? Each one of these filters is subjective and some of them eliminate information whose content could be considered as useful information. Besides, other subject appears in the horizon: will the Internet provider act in good faith or will they be to begin to assume responsibilities usually related to parents? Finally there are questions on how effective are those filters.

However we should go beyond those measures, I defend that it is necessary in a clear way to create a critical mass in terms of a collective conscience, that would allow changes in social models regarding the on-line behaviour, but as any change of mentalities in a society the temporary subject has a significant weight.

Introduction

The paper in cause is in accordance with his central subject, firstly approaches the sciences that aided me in the search of answers and the reason for ethics in the actual context, continuing with two introductory points that feed the remaining analytical points, which are: the potentials differences or not in terms of youths' development and the use of the Internet; their behavioural paradigm regarding the Internet and other Internet environments; the posture of the societies before the theme in cause; and, finally, "weighing" the ethics of this technology.

Given the extent of the paper, it became evident through the elaboration process, that the approach would be not only ethics, but also and unavoidably based on other social sciences, more in matter in the field of the Psychology, Philosophy, Anthropology, History and Sociology.

On the other hand, the need of the characteristic estrangement of the social sciences is fundamental, so we way reach to important reflection points, in spite of the inherent difficulties to the process.

I must say that, this article appears as a inevitable and even natural consequence of the previous two presented respectively in 2002 (Roxo & Costa, 2002) and in 2005 (Costa, 2005), given that, in both situations the answers were endorsed in a positive way, but the number of questions that appeared as consequence was of such order, that this article as I already affirmed appears naturally.

The ethics, its common sense, has its origin in the Ancient Greece. This means, if it was not an invention of our time, which would be the reasons for us to changing it, to become appropriate for tomorrow? Well, in the beginning, we may figure out certain ingenuousness in thinking that ethics follows fashions and innovations inherent to life our cultures. Will it be that the recent generations are so intelligent that discovered in ethics something what had been totally prohibited to their ancestors? But the facts are present: we felt that many conduct

rules and behaviours became invalid, that times changed and that only a certain blindness or obstinacy could impede the recognition of the deep mutations in which we are dived.

Development

Internet brief history

What began by being in a network for military ends during the Cold War and later to academic ends, the well known ARPANET, now Internet grew and it continues to grow, in fact, the use of the Internet has increased exponentially over the past five years. By the end of 1997 more than 100 million people were using the Internet, and traffic on it is doubling every 100 days (The Emerging Digital Economy, 1998). Parallel to this expansion in utilization has been substantial changes in Internet communication technology. Usenet newsgroup discussions and electronic mail were the predominant communication technologies during the earlier days. Today, the Internet offers a much wider scope of tools used for information transmission and retrieval, communication and interaction (December, 1996). In fact, testimony of that impressive massification is the possibility to buy an airplane ticket, of ordering a book in another country, to sell an apartment, to see the schedule of transports, finally, an endless list of usefulness just with a “click” of the mouse.

On the other hand, these technologies have created the capacity to enhance synchronicity, asynchronicity and interactivity in computer mediated communication (Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996; Weiser, 2001; Conde, Torres-Lana & Ruiz, 2002). In a study about the underlying motivations to the use of the Internet (Weiser, 2001) it appeared two robust dimensions that absorb 50% of the variance: a relational and affiliative motivation (socio-affective regulation) and a functional and utilitarian motivation (acquisition of information). Other authors still defend a third reason: the entertainment.

The problem: the young people and the Internet

In the literature on young people and youth culture, metaphors such as “transitional space”, “moratorium” or “free zone”, have been used in order to describe what it means to be young. Through using these metaphors, researchers seek to address two related aspects of the particular conditions shaping the life of youth in contemporary society. The first concerns how the phase of youth itself can be seen as a separated time in between the innocence and dependence upon others that characterize childhood, and the freedom but also responsibilities of adult life. The second aspect of young people’s specific life conditions concerns their quest for a space of their own, outside the control of adult society or, increasingly, commercial interests (Ziehe, 1994).

It is unquestionable that, maturation and culture influence the human development. The maturation process, for itself, doesn’t determine a complete development of the human being. Of all aspects related with the adolescent’s development, almost none is simultaneously so important and still as difficult of understanding as the subject of the values (Sprinthall & Collins, 1988).

The Internet is having a substantive effect on how people in our society behave and interact. For the first time in our history children are more comfortable and knowledgeable with a technology than are their parents, and there are important considerations in this switch (Tapscott, 1998). Telecommunication networks and computer technology are leading the change that is transforming our lives and we lack the resources to understand how to cope with the ethical changes (Stahl, 1999; Barroso, 2001; Gomes, 2002). The Internet put us in touch with the entire interconnected world with the ability to hurt, misunderstand, or infuriate through unintended cultural differences (Langford, 2000).

The extensive amount of time some spend online (Sparks, 2005) can lead to depression and other mental health related problems due to the lack of meaningful interactions and close

relationships with friends and family. Young people who spend hours online and limit their social interactions with their peers can become socially isolated as they lack opportunities to improve their social skills (Bostick, 2005). I believe that this emphasis is an actual developmental fact: adolescents use the Internet much more than children do (Thornburgh & Lin, 2002). However, the age of first Internet use is rapidly descending, being now under 12 years old (Wartella, Vandewater & Rideout, 2005). In conclusion, online interaction is just not the same.

Disparate or similar realities?

In analytical terms, there is an evident need to understand if the problem extent is really identical in the different human societies... In fact, the first comparative studies regarding young people socio-cognitive development processes and maturation remount to the 60's, especially with the research of Goslin and Norman Kiell about ethical and moral values formation process, having in consideration cognitive-development approach of Piaget and Kolberg (Sprinthall & Collins, 1988).

The results obtained in those studies allowed to value differences due to social and economical factors; however, the general tendencies were always the same ones. These data were appraised using an original evaluation system that was in a certain way intuitive. More recently, in the 90's, answers regarding the longitudinal sample were revalued focusing on the new theoretical developments. The results demonstrated small percentile variations in each group, and an invigoration of the global tendencies among human societies.

In the beginning of this century, due to the technological, social and cultural factors that affect the human societies, the analysis was re-examined, and once again still demonstrates a higher and intense invigoration of the global tendencies, just as expected, having in consideration the "failure" of the national boundaries due to the Internet and other technologies, and also because globalization (Guliciuc & Guliciuc, 2004). In fact, the current effects on behaviour in terms of language, identity, personality, attitudes and values are so intense that allowed the appearance of new investigation areas (Klein, Clark & Herskovitz, 2003).

In conclusion, we can't affirm that young people socio-cognitive development process is equal in all societies, due to its socio, historical, and cultural background, but there is clearly a tendency to values "massification", which can introduce important ethical issues.

A typical example of the statement above is presented: a recently research published in China Daily says that 17% of male youth and 10% of female youth is dependent of Internet use. The answers were obtained at schools, cybercafés and through Internet questionnaires. The research didn't reveal the exact number of Chinese addicts, but most of them are in the 13-17 year-old age group, and 23,2% of the high school students are addicted to the Internet. On the other hand, the presented research demonstrates in a clear sense the definition of Internet addict: "the users are happier in the virtual than in the real world, and they are frustrated if they cannot access to the web" (China Daily, 2005).

Young people behavioural paradigm in the Internet

In our day-to-day dealings with other people, there are social mores that govern our interactions with each person. We likely behave differently with our boss than with a co-worker; we treat a professor or dean differently than a classmate. And typically in dealing with people we do not know, we maintain some polite social distance. We may say that there is a negotiation process through our social papers, like Krawczyk-Brylka refers (Krawczyk-Brylka, 2001). However on the Internet, we lack many of those same ethical touchstones to guide our behaviour (Han & Wu, 2000).

A search of the Internet brings forth a number of articles about rampant rudeness on the web. The term "Netiquette" has been around for quite some time. It was formed from a

combination of the words “network” and “etiquette” (Scheuermann & Taylor, 1997). It is used to describe codes of behaviour that various online communities have developed over time (Ornatowski, 2001). The intent of netiquette is to provide guidelines or rules of behaviour online in an effort to combat rudeness.

For example, Americans in general use the very poorest etiquette when using the email and cell phones, etc. that they rely on the most and distance makes it easier to be confrontational (Careaga, 2005). While not included here there are a number of sources for appropriate etiquette on the Internet (Langford, 2000; Scheuermann & Taylor, 1997), especially young people. There are a number of challenges here because there is no tone of voice and no body language that gives us clues in our day-to-day in person communications (Scheuermann & Taylor, 1997). It is also easy to disguise who you really are (Langford, 2000). A child can pose as an adult, a young man, or as an old woman.

In many ways behaviours online mirror those in everyday life. Researchers have also found that 39% of American teens aged 12 to 17 admitted to saying things over text messaging that they would not normally say to someone in person. A key part of the challenge is that no one is exactly in control of Internet communication (Scheuermann & Taylor, 1997).

Young people behavioural paradigm in Internet particular environments

Multi User Domains (MUD's) are in the Internet a communication phenomenon. The introduction of this analytical point demonstrates the need to explain what behavioural differences arise from the use of the Internet by young people in particular environments, which is already an important research field as Suler (Suler, 1996) advocates.

However, the communicational perspective will be focus as a representation of the behavioural paradigm and not regarding the youths' motivation to use information technologies to communicate among them.

Previously, to MUD's appeared text video systems, which an example is Minitel (France).

This system already configured the fascination of young people regarding communication mediated by computers (CMC) (Castels, 1999). Later, it appeared MUD's (commonly known by IRC's), and, IRC while communication protocol was created by Jarkko Oikarinen in 1988, reaching “maturity” due two key moments in recent world history: the Golf War and coup d'état against Boris Yeltsin, in Russia, in September of 1993.

In conclusion, independently of the models that configure the connection to the Internet these they won't influence the content of this analytical point.

Regarding the symbolic reality and the production system, it is read in Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1982: 105): “the production system and circulation of symbolic goods is defined as the system of objective relationships among different defined instances having in consideration their function in work division along the production process, reproduction and diffusion of symbolic goods.” Adapting the above citation to the reality of MUD's, we can affirm that the circulation system of symbolic goods under mediatic users is defined in the speech reproduction face to other users. This is the first problem, being an appealing complaint of Internet users: the participants' identities in MUD's are created starting from what they believe. As Putnam refers (Putnam, 1988: 50 and 54), “the identity is different from the significance, being then apparent”. And this appearance is accused of false by users, being condemned while an existent group behaviour, demonstrating the critics of Laatz (Laatz, 2005) regarding trust in CMC. However, it is really important to refer that some users feel positively satisfied with the essence of the communication through MUD's: this is configured as anonymous, elaborated by anonymous individuals.

The lack, in beginning, of the individuals' social identification in MUD's illustrates clearly a rhetorical game that it will formulate a “me” in the Internet. Those “me's” are not willing in the net at random, actually they have specific purposes. Explains Sodré (Sodré, 2002: 158):

“actually, it is common knowledge at some time and also reiterated by several academics, that the individual is a “knot” of relationships. But in first place we have to understand this behaviour while tecnonarcissism, which means a mediatic appropriation of the narcissism, for that, it holds the dissolution of its own identity as a function of another itself in the mirror. The second reason demonstrates a connection or a technical structure of relationships (relatedness), where processes like memory, thought and attitude stop being interpreted as interiors to individuals, transforming themselves in representatives' social strategies regarding the speech conditions and symbolic negotiation”. When in MUD´s, each “I” become an image of the individual with its specific strategies and own speech, in agreement with the communicational intention of the human support, an “I” is used to reach the objectives drawn by its strategy.

Identifying him conveniently, user creates an appropriate speech of a “me” that speaks on behalf of the human support on that occasion. The underlying idea is that an “I” represents a being, which coincide with the speech formulation and analysis. The concern at this stage its the “statement subject”, just as Pinto (Pinto, 1999) describes it, that is, if the statement author isn't lying, the “I” mentioned in the statement is a fictitious character, that cannot be identified with the empiric author, only responsible, if the lie is discovered by the speaker or by the statement physical production.

However, as we know is extremely difficult to identify in a speech a lie, being extremely imprecise to prove the image transformations of each “me” in MUD´s. On the other hand, if we consider a situation that is not a lie and an image of him, even an occult “me”, the statement subject changes to the “me” and to the human support that produces it, inserted in its usual social context is the empiric author.

On the other hand, each “I”, subject that produces speech in the Internet through MUD´s, through its specific intentions, as well as, we cannot despise that each “me”, inserted in MUD´s, doesn't stop being representative of a physical body, and demonstrating the inherent complexity of the human being, just as Sodré (Sodré, 2002) pleads, that is, implicates a mental and emotional plot, that hides a real corporal immobility of that subject, for that, the corporal unreality hides equally existence, feelings, emotions and knowledge. In fact, each one of statements parameters presents temporary behaviours in the process elapsing.

Even before the "Netiquette", the moral norms of Internet behaviour, the parameters of relationships establishment among the “I´s” is a function of each presented behaviour, influenced by the communicational situation proportionate by the Internet. Now, facing a disturbed individual the “I” may assume equally behavioural deviations in MUD´s and, consequently that volatility of the “I” can transform it or even transforming it in another “me”.

Before the statements presented until this moment we can conclude that the youths' behavioural paradigm in MUD´s configures:

- 1) the illusion of the user to be an actor of himself;
- 2) the opportunity to “sell” what is believed to establish an escape pact regarding failures of the real life;
- 3) the election of a value with base in the social believes so it could be possible to find a connection point in another equivalent and compatible value;
- 4) the pleasure to condition the elaboration of a “me” that assists the prerequisites of others, at the same time that soughts “I´s” with it is possible to create an identification.

The society's posture

The issues raised by the Internet reinforce the present trends towards globalisation of economic, political and social systems. It is thus necessary to examine the impact of the Internet through the society in this complex, changing era.

The discussion regarding Internet ethical issues started in the ninety's and during the IFIP-WCC'94 in Hamburg, a group of researchers and academics presented the project "second Internet", which would be only dedicated to business. The Blue Ribbon Campaign (as was known that group of researchers) and similar anti-censorship manifestations hark back to the origins, when the Internet was mainly a tool for research and education, which means, operating according to the principle of "academic freedom."

The first ethical issues that arise were namely about standards and routing administration, encryption, digital signature, Internet service providers licensing, property rights, tariffs, computer crime, etc. The debate is now lively because the key issue is "what kind of regulation?" The literature demonstrates two analytical perspectives: rules by governments or self-regulation by business and users (Graham, 2000; Froelich, 2000; Frohmann, 2000). If we need Internet governance, the question may be raised: "do we need ethical governance?" And therefore also: "what does it mean?" Julie Cameron et al. state it in a simple way (Cameron et al., 1992):

- information technology is a powerful and constantly evolving tool;
- information technology permeates all aspects of our lives;
- information technology dependency creates vulnerability on a large scale;
- information technology evolution and usage outstrips the formulation and implementation of policy and legal instruments.

There has been a relatively easy consensus that ethics is necessary on the net when speaking about protection of equity in the right access, respect of the person's dignity, justice and social exclusion, respect for the interests and people rights, free speech/censorship, life quality, right to information, personal qualities, non-abuse of power, respect for cultural differences, freedom of choice in the use or non-use of the Internet and grounding virtual life (Hauptman, 2004).

The "Action plan on promoting safer use of the Internet" is part of a coherent set of policies at the European Union level to deal with illegal and harmful content on the Internet. Other international organisations such as UNESCO have also developed actions to meet this general preoccupation. But this is probably the emerging part of the iceberg. These measures however generate other essential questions...

When Internet filters try to control what people can see, it raises a question. Are these filters a valuable tool to eliminate unethical issues or are they instead some form of extremist control? (Kandra, 2004) Each of these filters is subjective and some of them eliminate sites that might provide useful information, such as the classic case of a site that filtered out information on breast cancer in an attempt to avoid pictures of breasts in a pornographic sense. Filters have another downside in that they can limit access based on social decisions (Krantz, 1997). It also raises the question about the Internet provider: are they acting in good faith or are they starting to take responsibilities more appropriately assigned to parents?

Finally there are questions about the effectiveness of filters. Statistics from one study show that they are only 80% effective and those students can work around them. This same study also shows that 70% of 13 and 14 year olds go into chat rooms where they might be exposed to unethical subjects (Jones, 2002).

However we should go beyond those measures, I defend that it is necessary in a clear way to create a critical mass movement in terms of a collective conscience. But what is collective conscience? Well, until now only academic or researchers and governments are paying attention to these issues. Collective conscience is the need of citizens in general understands what it is the scenario, allowing changes in social models regarding the on-line behaviour. However, I advocate that the critical mass movement is starting, but will only be possible after the generation gap disappear. Even so, this statement may induce some critics...

Generation gap had always existed, especially when new technologies arise, but never with

these characteristics. Technologists defend that the same problem will also occur in the next generations, due to the technological evolution, but I totally disagree. If a person uses technology through life will be less resistant to change, which means future parents will understand the raising issues of that technology, creating the critical mass movement.

Conclusion

First, we must see the Internet as a new social environment in which universal adolescent issues such as identity, sexuality, and a sense of self-worth are played out in a virtual world in ways that are both new and old (Subrahmanyam et al., 2000/2001). However, as a social environment, it is important not to see the Internet as an external environment that is doing something or other to the adolescent (the effects model). In the popular communication functions of the Internet such as e-mail, instant messaging, blogs, chat, and bulletin boards, adolescents are basically co-constructing their own environments (notwithstanding the minority of older-than-adolescents who may participate). Hence, cultural theories, such as those from linguistic anthropology or conversational analysis that emphasize co-construction become very relevant (Duranti, 1997), or even, more generic theories, like the link between culture and ethics can provide useful frameworks that allow to understand that social environment.

The studies that utilize chat or bulletin boards as their virtual research site offer a rare glimpse into adolescent peer interaction and adolescent peer culture in this particular historical period. Indeed, we can think of the Internet as providing researchers with a window into the secret world of adolescent peer culture, even as it offers young people a new screen for the projection of adolescent developmental issues. The Internet is also unique as a social environment in that it offers an expanded and potentially globalized social milieu. Networks can be small and intimate, as in instant messaging- just a new way of communicating (perhaps more frequently and faster) with familiar others (Gross, 2004). They can also be very large- either national or global. Large national networks are found in the chat rooms and bulletin boards studied. A global network for adolescents has been created, which then takes the development of leadership to an international scale, a scale that would hitherto have been virtually (pun intended!) impossible.

Second, we must see the Internet as a new cultural tool (Vygotsky, 1978) or, better, as a cultural tool kit. The Internet is cultural because it is shared, norms are developed, and these communication norms (Greenfield & Subrahmanyam, 2003) are transmitted to new generations of users, even as the new users, greater access, and technological innovation create new norms. However, this statement produces an important question: on-line and off-line behaviour present similar results before identical problems? On the other hand, on-line behaviour enlarges dramatically unethical behaviours due to the absence of face-to-face contact, as well as, ethics on-line is a global phenomenon and face-to-face ethics represent "local ethics" due to cultural influence.

Third, we must see the Internet as a new object of cognition, neither a concrete artefact nor a visible social partner, but a gigantic virtual complex network of networks. As such, its interpretation becomes a locus for manifesting cognitive development shows. In contrast to the extensive developmental literature that has documented when, how, and why children come to understand natural, social, and mental concepts (Carey, 1985; Gopnik, Meltzoff, & Kuhl, 1999; Keil, 1989; Wellman & Gelman, 1998), research into children's understanding of complex artefacts such as the Internet is scarce. The Internet is a hybrid of artefactual (computer screens and keyboards), social (communications with people), and mental-like systems (invisible virtuality).

To study their understanding of the Internet challenges the boundaries between the traditional categories of cognitive development, social-cognitive development, and social development.

Fourth, we must see the Internet as a source of new methods for developmental research, as well as a new research environment that requires the development of new methodologies. As a source of new methods, applications for public communication, represented in this special section by chat rooms and bulletin boards, provide a locus for observing peer interaction that is usually hidden from the view of adults in general and researchers in particular.

In conclusion, we may say that new directions and new findings arise everyday (Bauer, 1964), specially in the Internet.

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