

# **Educational Enlightenments from Internet Ethics Issues**

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## **Abstract**

With the rapid development of computer technology and the advent of internet, our society is facing violent changes. Every user can make a connection with others by computers and network to build quite a few virtual communities as our groups in our real society in which we can express emotions, deliver opinions, thoughts and so on; however, internet's traits such as anonymity, dissemination make users cause damage to other people easily. Therefore, it seems necessary to cover issues about internet ethics into our curriculum and education. If we can understand relative issues regarding internet ethics, it is possible for us to avoid hurting others and violating law while employing computers and network.

Keywords: Cyberspace, Internet Ethics, Educational Enlightenment

## **1. Introduction**

With the rapid development of computer technology and the advent of network, our society is facing unprecedented changes. At the beginning of internet development in the 1970s, each network only could make connection to 256 computers, internet was able to make connection to at most 25 networks, so about hundreds of computers could connect one another and there were about thousands of people using it. However, Castells pointed out in 1999 that according to V. Cerf's statistics, internet connected 3.6 million websites, 63 million main engines(host computers), over two hundred countries and about 179 million users; before 2010, over one billion host computers will connect with network and there will be over 2 billion users(Hong Ru Yu, 2003). Therefore, our lives are getting much closer to computer; even everything in our real society will probably be put into virtual space of computer network.

By computers and network, each user can connect with each other to form a lot of communities which are the same as our groups in real society in which we can express emotions, deliver opinions and so on. However, quite a few problems in our real world such as rumors, impoliteness, deceit and so on also happen in the cyberspace; moreover, because of internet's anonymity and dissemination right, these situations will get worse and worse. As Gerald (1996) said, so far as ethics is concerned, the dramatic changes caused by computer and internet have already given rise to new problems and challenges.

It is unavoidable to face the information network era. In addition to reinforcing the ability to apply information technology, is there another reflection for education? First of all, this article will discuss the essence of cyberspace, then deal with the issues of internet ethics and finally draw the enlightenments for education.

## **2. The Essence of Cyberspace**

Cyberspace not only consists of global computer network, but is a sort of spatial form composed of data and information. Nguyen and Alexander (1996) mentions compared with

the concept about computer hardware, cyberspace is a multidimensional substance which integrates all kinds of mankind's words and deeds, even thoughts. As a matter of fact, cyberspace originated from the Cyberpunk novel—*Neuromancer* by William Gibson in 1984. Its original meaning was “data space in computer”; however, activities now in the cyberspace are more than search of data or information. Activities such as communication, shopping, entertainment and so on now can take place in the virtual space, too. This article will discuss issues about internet ethics, so the focus will be agents in the cyberspace who can be divided into individual and community.

## **2.1 Individual in the Cyberspace**

Except for scanning data or information, entering internet world, each individual needs at least one new ID. For example, while entering Newsgroup or BBS, every individual has to decide a code name that is his/her avatar to register. However, every individual can have possession of quite a few code names or avatars allowing him/her to enter the same or different websites, and the avatars in the cyberspace can be different from individual in the real world. Therefore, in the internet world each individual can arbitrarily define his/her avatars. Every user entering the cyberspace can create a virtual world where activities such as making friends, chatting, sharing information, expressing emotion, building a stable social relationship and what not can happen, and which is not associated with real life. As stated above, every user can own more than one avatar and arbitrarily defined their avatars, so the order, hierarchy and model in the real world are able to be broken and reorganized easily; meanwhile, actual feelings, thoughts, wrath and discontent in the mind can be conveyed, too. Therefore, on-line discussion is easier than face-to-face one to shun the interference of social factors, such as age, vocation, gender, race, hierarchy and the like.

Considerable freedom and security can be acquired by individuals entering the cyberspace in that he/she conveys what he/she wants to say and do without showing the actual identification, such as criticizing government, giving vent to sexual desire, and publicizing actual temperament. Hence, cyberspace may provide each individual with several following needs (Hong Ru Yu, 2003):

### **1.) The need of security**

Psychologist Maslow's need-hierarchy theory mentions mankind's needs can be classified into seven hierarchies, and one of them is safety need. On account of anonymity, each user feels safer and dares to talk with others in the cyberspace about their feelings and thoughts unknown by people, even fragile emotion and evil nature.

### **2.) The showing of controlling desire**

The most obvious example is users with high computer technology ability can build websites or design frontpages where they decide and manipulate contents by themselves.

### **3.) The satisfaction of role-playing**

By various avatars, each user in the internet world can play any kinds of roles that won't be realized by them forever in the real world. For example, on-line games supply this function.

### **4.) The venting of sexual desire**

Cyberspace is filled with “eroticism”, including obscene articles, pornographic pictures, video clips concerning sex, one night stand, netsex and what not, which indicates that cyberspace furnishes considerable contentment of lust.

## **2.2 Community in Cyberspace**

Generally speaking, communities are made up of groups of people, so the moment users come into the same information space with avatars, they may form virtual communities whose kinds contain Newgroup, chatroom, BBS, on-line games and so forth, where users are able to exert different avatars at the same time to participate in manifold activities, build and manage stable social and interactive relationship. Hence, what can be done in the real world almost can be done in the cyberspace. Strictly speaking, these communities may be extension of real world or independent of real society, but the boundary between them is not very clear.

The most prominent characteristics of these communities are “sharing”, for instance, emotion, opinions, articles and information, and “interaction”, such as building stable or multiple social relationships. The operation of these communities is the same as that of communities in the real world, even more open and frequent because users are anonymous as well as autonomous. As stated above, anonymous individuals in the cyberspace can own multiple avatars and play different roles, so it is extremely difficult to tell actual individual from virtual one. They may be greatly different or perhaps actual self is composed of quiet a few avatars who can interact with other avatars, effect others and be influenced by others, too.

## **3. The Issues of Internet Ethics**

Ethics, a kind of subtler morality, usually is employed to define some sorts of specific organizations, ethnic groups or social hierarchy; hence, there are usually specific terms before “ethics” to define scopes and objects, such as family ethics, social ethics, political ethics and what not(Guo Hong Zhi, 1998). It goes without saying that it also includes internet ethics deriving from the development of internet; however, what is internet ethics and what does it involve? I will give it a definition and discuss the issues about it. The right or wrong about the utility of internet by mankind can be called internet ethics. The utility of internet by mankind includes interpersonal communication, information’s delivery, research, storage and so on. The issues about internet ethics are as follow(Guo Hong Zhi, 1988 ; Rong Tai Sheng ; Cai Zhe Min ; Gi Guo Xiong, 1988 ; Emmans, 2000;Kizza, 2002;Spinello,2000):

### **3.1 Privacy**

Privacy, a well-known noue, represents respect for a man. Because one of internet’s traits is anonymity, most people deem that they have complete privacy. However, when communicating with one another, people usually reveal other people’s privacy consciously or unconsciously. As far as internet users are concerned, when the mail coming from other people is remailed to another, e-mail addresses usually are revealed, or the content of e-mail is publicized without permission. So far as providers of internet resources are concerned, with some equipment plus computer technology, they are able to build websites and become ‘managers of internet resources’. In order to maintain the websites, managers usually own a great deal of power. For example, they can read personal e-mail, retrieve data flowing through their machines, control, create and destroy files; they can even become anyone of users. Langford (1996) looks upon these managers as superusers.

### **3.2 Dissemination**

One of internet’s characteristics is grassroot connection (Wang Zhi Hing, 2001 ; Wu Yan Ji, 1998) whose advantage is to enable people in the lowest social hierarchy as those in the highest social hierarchy to own the same power and equal opportunity to express their viewpoints, thoughts and opinions. Besides, because the internet supplies three kinds of

basic services: e-mail, Newsgroup and frontpage (Convington, 1997), internet nearly provides every user with unlimited dissemination. By e-mail or Newsgroup, any sort of opinions and thoughts can be spread all over the world. On the one hand, it can help people communicate, express opinions and thoughts, and get responses from other people fast; on the other hand, it also may be misused, such as quite a few bothering ads, fraud letters, nonsense articles interfering seriously with other people's chances to get useful information.

### **3.3 Intellectual Property Rights**

Intellectual property rights have been a serious problem, let alone those of internet. As internet is filled with smell of "convenience" and spirit of "sharing", a number of pictures, articles and files can be copied and stored in our computers as long as you take some steps, which almost nobody knows; what is more, by CD-Recordable Drive, all the data you copy can be stored completely. Besides, it is quite convenient to download software. In spite of many free resources, this doesn't mean that we can randomly employ them without permissions (Cai Zhe Min). If the resource providers also use and copy other people's resources without permission, maybe we will not be aware of who is real and original resource provider for good.

### **3.4 Responsibility of Speaking**

This problem mainly comes from anonymity or pseudonym of internet. There are advantages for anonymity. For example, it enables people to speak out what is hidden in their minds, to express their real opinions and, to protect themselves and to avoid a lot of trouble. However, without taking responsibility for what they say under the mask of anonymity, people are inclined to publish destructive, pornographic, calumnious, or fraudulent articles and opinions. Common as anonymity is, internet's rapid and extensive spread usually causes a great amount of inestimable and uncompensatory damage.

### **3.5 Accuracy of Information**

Accuracy of information has a great influence on our daily life. If resource providers supply incompletely correct or wrong information, it will lead internet users to make wrong decisions or judgments, which does much damage to users; what's worse, it probably gets innocent people into trouble. Inaccuracy of information maybe derives from the improper design of the software and the hardware, the intrusion of the system, mistakes of resource providers etc, which can be prevented and excluded in advance (Wang Zhi Hong, 2000).

### **3.6 Utility of Internet**

Internet doesn't have real physical boundary; the only actual boundary lies in the gap between the rich and the poor (Emmans, 2000). The rich are able to surf the internet in the school or at home at any time; however, the poor maybe surf the internet for free in the school or in the library. In the information era, those who own information technology and successfully employ it can have wealth, power and further create knowledge. Hence, the utility of the internet should be spread, not be controlled by some advantageous people. Rogerson thought that the gap of internet information between the rich and the poor would be gradually getting bigger and bigger with job opportunities, elections, education, medical insurance, shopping and so on, taking place in virtual space, which will cause social dissatisfaction as well as turbulence (Gi Guo Xiong, 1998).

## **4. Educational Enlightenments from Internet Ethics**

It is unavoidable to employ internet in the future, and its development may be diverse beyond our imagination. Therefore, the moment internet brings us quite a few advantages as well as convenience, we will also prevent many kinds of problems from occurring in the cyberspace. At present, the disobedience of internet ethics is getting worse and worse. One of the reasons is that the developmental speed of information technology goes beyond what we think. The previous impression of computer is used to deal with some extremely complicated data or mathematic operations; few people suppose that computer will become communicative media among people. Of course, the advent and development of internet plays a very important role in this situation. Therefore, we rarely think of issues regarding internet ethics, and there were seldom relative issues in the former moral education we took. In order to avoid breaking the law or causing people's inconvenience, it is necessary to put issues about internet ethics into the curriculum in the moral education, especially when Grade 1-9 Curriculum has included information education. In addition to strengthening ability of using information technology, relative education of morality shouldn't be ignored; after all, the internet and the computer must be a main media of information spread and interpersonal communication. Educational enlightenments form internet ethics are as follow:

#### **4.1 Curriculum**

##### **1.) Issues about internet ethics should be put into information education curriculum**

In the internet age, person, organization, community and society will more and more depend on computers; hence, the ethical issues from internet and computer, such as privacy, dissemination, intellectual property rights and what not, should be put into information curricula in compulsory education. Not only does information education reinforce people's ability of using computer technology, but it should enable people to be more familiar with relative ethical issues so that you will not infringe on, hurt others or even take the risk of violating law while you employ computers and internet.

##### **2.) Knowledge about technology law should be taken into information education curriculum (Hong Ru Yu, 2003).**

As mentioned above, when we are familiar with relative ethical issues, it is possible for us to avoid infringing upon, hurt others and even taking the risk of breaking law. Hence, it is quite essential for students to develop their cognition about technology law. After all, law category is not completely the same as ethical one. Therefore, we should enable students to become acquainted with relative articles of law in the curriculum and provide new information regarding technology law, which can develop students' familiarity of technology law; furthermore, we also instruct them how to look up relative articles of law.

#### **4.2 Teacher Training**

##### **1.) Enhancing ability of making use of technology in normal education**

「 Good tools are prerequisite to the successful execution of job 」 . In the information internet era, if teachers want to instruct students in computer and internet, they themselves must excel in applying computer technology so that they can be aware of how to teach and make their students understand it. In addition, provided that teachers can acquaint themselves with computer technology or training of internet information is quite complete, they will be able to know ethical issues coming from technology more easily, which enables us to avoid being involved in unlawful problems.

##### **2.) Add to issues about internet ethics in normal education**

As stated before, few people suppose that computer and internet will become a sort of communicative means among people; therefore, in order to keep up with modern trend, it is necessary to add to issues about internet ethics in the curriculum of normal education so that on the one hand teachers can set examples by their actions; on the other hand they can teach students knowledge about internet ethics, which can lay successful foundation of internet ethical education. Further, it is essential for future teachers to develop sensitivity, and ability of speculation and judgment on internet ethics (Hong Ru Yu, 2003).

#### **4.3 Parent-child Education**

Parent-child education is a kind of self-education that parents take with an eye to keeping up with trend and playing successful parental roles(Zhang Chun Xing, 2001). When children are born in the information and internet times, parents ought to know more or less computer technology so that parents can understand what their kids do in front of computers. Therefore, in addition to some basic and prerequisite computer knowledge, there should be some issues about internet ethics in the parent-child education. After all, it is possible for children to surf internet at home, so parents must be responsible for it. Emmans(2000) mentioned that proper interference and honest discussion could help children understand relative ethical issues.

#### **4.4 Information Equipment**

As stated above, with job opportunities, elections, education, medical insurance, shopping and what not taking place in the virtual space, the gap of internet information between the rich and the poor will be getting bigger and bigger, which will cause social dissatisfaction and turbulence. Besides, it is absolutely unavoidable to face the internet age; so we should not only abbreviate disparity in information equipment between the city and the country, but we should make it widespread like compulsory education so that it's possible to avoid the information gap from unequal utility of internet, differences between the rich and the poor and the digital gap between the city and the country.

### **5. Conclusion**

Although the advent of internet has changed the way that knowledge is spread and presented, in itself it can't still be independent of interaction among people even if you merely surf internet to search data, not chat in that it is 「men」 that manipulate presentation of data and application of technology. New environment as cyberspace is, everything is still done by 「men」. Therefore, ethics among people in the real world can still be applied to this virtual space, and can't be ignored only because of anonymity, dissemination, advanced technology and so on. Although our society and environment are changing gradually, internet ethics should not be independent of traditional ethics(Cai Zhe Min), and they should combine closely to form a new power. Further, ethics should not be ignored and destroyed with development of technology; instead, it should be stricter, or there will be a lot of disasters and pain. Then it goes without saying that people will pay extreme price on account of technology. Hence, it is necessary to take issues about internet ethics into our education. Maybe people doubt that if issues about internet ethics are taken into our curriculum, should disobedience of internet ethics be resolved? Of course, it can't be completely resolved. Take us for example, when we were children, our parents and teachers instilled us quite a few ethical and moral conceptions, but as we grow into adults, we can't still become a perfect man. We still disobey ethics and morals, such as tearing open another's letters without permission, throwing randomly trash and what not; however, we

don't exclude them from our education or negate their importance. After all, installation and instruction at the age of children enable us to develop a sort of consciousness. Perhaps this consciousness can't promise that we can absolutely obey moral ethics, but at least it makes us consider before doing something wrong or we will feel ashamed after doing something wrong. Therefore, the minute law can't keep up with technology or technology can not ameliorate disobedience, it is a good way to change our inside concepts as well as thoughts. After all, self-management, self-control and self-responsibility are the best guarantees of not disobeying internet ethics in the cyberspace.

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