

The Ethical Implications of Digital Communication

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Abstract

The increasing use of digital communication technologies has raised significant ethical concerns related to privacy, security, cyberbullying, online harassment, and the spread of misinformation. This paper examines the ethical implications of digital communication and proposes solutions to mitigate these concerns. It also explores the impact of digital communication on public opinion and democracy. By addressing these ethical concerns and promoting responsible use of digital communication technologies, we can ensure the protection of individual rights and the integrity of democratic institutions. The methodology used in achieving the aim of this paper is the analytic and phenomenological approaches, that is, analysis of main concepts and phenomenological examination of textual materials are adopted in the write up.

Keywords: digital communication, ethics, cyberbullying, misinformation, responsible use.

Introduction

There have been Nigerian scholars and philosophers who have written on the topic of the ethical implications of digital communication. One notable scholar in this area is Dr. Oluwaseun Bamidele, a lecturer in the Department of Philosophy at Adekunle Ajasin University in Nigeria. In his article titled "The Ethics of Social Media and Digital Communication," published in the *Journal of Philosophy and Social Policy* in 2018, he discusses the ethical challenges of digital communication in Nigeria and the need for ethical guidelines to regulate its use.

Bamidele argues that the widespread use of digital communication technologies in Nigeria has created new ethical challenges related to privacy, security, cyberbullying, and the spread of fake news. He notes that social media platforms have become a tool for political propaganda and manipulation in Nigeria and calls for the development of ethical guidelines to address these issues. Bamidele also emphasizes the need for digital literacy and education in Nigeria to

promote responsible and ethical use of digital communication technologies. He suggests that individuals need to be aware of the ethical implications of their online behavior and be accountable for their actions.

Another Nigerian scholar who has written on the topic of digital ethics is Dr. Julius Olusegun Adekunle, a lecturer in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Lagos in Nigeria. In his article titled "Cyber Ethics: The Moral Challenges of the Information Age," published in the *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research* in 2015, he explores the ethical implications of digital communication and the need for ethical guidelines to regulate its use. In the view of Adekunle, the fact that there is anonymity in digital communication permits the rise of online harassment of various forms as well as cyberbullying. He also opined that uncontrolled spread of misinformation and propaganda has eroded public trust in information sources. He suggests that ethical guidelines can help to address these issues by promoting responsible and ethical use of digital communication technologies.

Another Nigerian scholar who has written on the topic of digital ethics is Dr. Oluwakemi Ademola-Aremu, a lecturer in the Department of Philosophy at Covenant University in Nigeria. In her article titled "The Ethics of Digital Communication in the Nigerian Context," published in the *Journal of Humanities and Social Science Studies* in 2020, she examines the ethical implications of digital communication in Nigeria, including privacy, cyber bullying, and fake news. Ademola-Aremu argues that the anonymity provided by digital communication can lead to unethical behavior and calls for the development of ethical guidelines to regulate its use.

In addition to these scholars, other Nigerian researchers have also contributed to the discussion of digital ethics. For example, in a study published in the *International Journal of Advanced Research* in 2021, Adenike Adesanmi and Olukemi Adedeji examined the ethical challenges of digital communication in Nigeria, including the spread of fake news and hate speech. They concluded that ethical guidelines and digital literacy programs are needed to promote responsible and ethical use of digital communication technologies in Nigeria.

Furthermore, a study by Olanrewaju Oladejo and Olukemi Adedeji, published in the *Journal of African Studies and Development* in 2020, analyzed the impact of digital communication on Nigerian journalism and the need for ethical guidelines to regulate its use. The authors argue that the spread of fake news and propaganda has undermined the credibility of Nigerian journalism and that ethical guidelines can help to address these issues.

Overall, Nigerian scholars and researchers have contributed to the global discussion on the ethical implications of digital communication, emphasizing the need for ethical guidelines to regulate its use and promote responsible online behavior and digital literacy programs to promote responsible and ethical use of digital communication technologies in Nigeria.

Literature Review:

The widespread use of digital communication technologies has created new ethical challenges related to privacy, security, cyberbullying, online harassment, and the spread of misinformation. This literature review explores some of the most pressing ethical issues surrounding digital communication and the current state of research on these topics. These ethical implications of digital communication refer to the ethical concerns associated with the use of digital communication technologies, such as social media, online messaging, and video conferencing. These technologies have the potential to significantly impact our ethical behavior, both individually and collectively.

Ethics and Social Media:

As digital communication technologies become increasingly integrated into our daily lives, there are growing concerns about their ethical implications. One area of concern is the use of social media platforms for the spread of misinformation, hate speech, and other forms of harmful content. According to Taddeo and Floridi (2018), it is expedient for social media platforms to monitor and regulate content posted on them in order to protect users from harm. However, there is a need for us to consciously ensure that we maintain a balance between freedom of expression and the need to protect individuals from harm in the digital world.

Moreover, the ethical implications of social media extend beyond individual users to society as a whole. According to Van Dijck (2013), social media platforms are increasingly shaping public opinion and discourse, which raises important questions about the role of these platforms in shaping democracy and the public sphere. This includes concerns about the potential for social media platforms to reinforce existing power structures and marginalize certain groups.

Another ethical concern related to social media is the issue of digital surveillance. As we engage with digital communication technologies, we leave behind a digital footprint that can be tracked and monitored. This raises important questions about the balance between privacy and security in the digital world. According to Floridi (2014), there is a need for a new framework for thinking about privacy and security in the digital world that takes into account the unique features of these technologies and the impact they have on social relationships and interactions.

Online Harassment and Cyberbullying:

One of the most significant ethical implications of digital communication is online harassment and cyberbullying. Online harassment refers to “the use of digital communication technologies to intimidate, threaten, or humiliate others” (Citron, 2014). Cyberbullying refers to the use of digital communication technologies to harass, humiliate, or harm others repeatedly and intentionally (Patchin & Hinduja, 2018). Both online harassment and cyberbullying are widespread and can have significant negative impacts on individuals' mental health and well-being. In other words, it involves the use of digital communication technologies to harass, intimidate, or harm others (Kowalski & Limber, 2013). Cyberbullying can have serious consequences for individuals' mental health and well-being, and addressing it requires a comprehensive approach involving education, prevention, and intervention.

The anonymity provided by digital communication allows individuals to engage in aggressive behavior without fear of retaliation. According to Roberts and Roach (2017), cyberbullying and online harassment can have severe consequences for victims, including depression, anxiety, and even suicide. Studies have shown that young people are particularly vulnerable to these types of behaviors (Kowalski et al., 2018).

Privacy, Security and Data Protection:

Another significant ethical implication of digital communication is privacy and data protection. Digital communication technologies collect large amounts of personal data, including personal information, browsing history, and location data. This data can be used for a variety of purposes, including targeted advertising, surveillance, and tracking (Solove, 2013). According to Ess (2013), social media platforms have a responsibility to protect users' privacy and ensure that their personal information is not misused. However, this raises important questions about how to balance the need for privacy with the desire for social connection and the sharing of personal information in the digital world.

Privacy and data protection are essential to ensure individuals' autonomy and freedom in the digital age. Digital communication technologies have made it easier for individuals to share personal information online, but this has also raised concerns about data privacy and security. Individuals have a right to privacy, and organizations have a responsibility to “protect individuals' personal information from unauthorized access, use, or disclosure” (Madden & Rainie, 2015). However, the collection and use of personal data by technology companies and other organizations are often opaque and difficult for individuals to control, raising concerns

about the potential misuse or abuse of personal data. The collection, use, and sharing of personal data on digital communication platforms have raised significant concerns about privacy and security. According to Moor (1985), the ethical issues related to computer technology arise from the fact that these technologies have the potential to harm individuals, organizations, and society as a whole. Personal data collected by digital communication platforms may be used for targeted advertising, political manipulation, or even identity theft. The rise of big data has further complicated concerns for privacy, as organizations collect and analyze enormous amounts of personal information for various purposes (Tene & Polonetsky, 2014).

Digital Divide:

The digital divide refers to the unequal access to digital communication technologies and the internet. Access to digital communication technologies is critical for participation in modern society and the economy (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001). The digital divide can exacerbate social inequality, as those without access to digital communication technologies may be excluded from essential services, education, and economic opportunities. Thus, digital communication technologies have the potential to exacerbate social inequalities by creating a digital divide between those who have access to these technologies and those who do not (Warschauer, 2003). This can have significant consequences for individuals' educational, social, and economic opportunities, and addressing the digital divide requires efforts to increase access to digital communication technologies and promote digital literacy.

Misinformation, propaganda and Fake News:

Digital communication technologies have also been associated with the spread of fake news and misinformation. The way information can be shared online with ease, coupled with the lack of editorial oversight, has made it easier for misinformation and fake news to spread (Woolley & Howard, 2016). Misinformation and fake news can have significant negative impacts on individuals and society, including undermining trust in institutions and eroding social cohesion. Digital communication platforms have also facilitated the rapid spread of propaganda. Social media platforms have been particularly effective in spreading false information, leading to our general concerns about how such misinformation impact on public opinion and democracy. Sunstein (2018) argues that social media has contributed to the rise of "echo chambers," where individuals are exposed only to information that reinforces their preexisting beliefs. This can lead to the polarization of society and the erosion of trust in public institutions.

Digital Responsibility:

The rise of digital communication technologies has also highlighted the importance of digital responsibility. The ethical and moral responsibilities individuals and organizations have when using digital communication technologies is referred to as digital responsibility (Johnson, 2018). Individuals have a responsibility to use digital communication technologies in ways that are respectful, truthful, and contribute to the well-being of others. Organizations have a responsibility to ensure that their products and services are designed and implemented in ways that respect individuals' rights and promote social good.

Digital Citizenship:

Digital citizenship refers to the responsible and ethical use of digital communication technologies. It involves a set of behaviors, attitudes, and values that promote positive online interactions, such as being respectful, trustworthy, and responsible (Ribble, Bailey, & Ross, 2004). Digital citizenship is essential for creating safe and supportive online communities and promoting digital literacy and digital well-being.

Algorithmic Bias:

Digital communication technologies are increasingly using algorithms to make decisions about individuals' lives, such as hiring decisions, loan approvals, and targeted advertising. Algorithmic bias refers to the tendency of these algorithms to produce biased or discriminatory outcomes, such as favoring one group over another (Barocas & Selbst, 2016). Algorithmic bias can exacerbate social inequality and perpetuate discrimination, and addressing it requires careful attention to the design and implementation of algorithms.

Impact on Democracy

Digital communication platforms have played a significant role in shaping public opinion and the democratic process. Social media platforms have become a powerful tool for political campaigns, and their use has led to concerns about the influence of these platforms on the democratic process. Sunstein (2018) argues that social media has contributed to the fragmentation of society and the rise of tribalism. Studies have also shown that social media can have a significant impact on political opinions, leading to concerns about the potential for manipulation and interference in elections (Guess et al., 2018).

In summary, the ethical implications of digital communication are complex and multifaceted, and require ongoing attention and engagement. Addressing these ethical concerns requires a multi-stakeholder approach, involving policymakers, technology companies, civil society organizations, and individuals. Only by working together can we ensure that digital

communication technologies are used in ways that respect individuals' rights, promote social good, and contribute to a more equitable and just society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, digital communication technologies have created new ethical challenges that require attention and solutions. The protection of personal data, prevention of cyberbullying and online harassment, combating the spread of misinformation, and promoting transparency and accountability in the use of digital communication platforms are critical issues. By promoting responsible and ethical use of digital communication technologies, we can ensure the protection of individual rights and the integrity of democratic institutions.

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