

Antonio Marturano:

The Ethics of Online Social Networks – An Introduction

According to a pioneering study,

"When a computer network connects people or organizations, it is a social network. Just as a computer network is a set of machines connected by a set of cables, a social network is a set of people (or organizations or other social entities) connected by a set of social relationships, such as friendship, co-working or information exchange"¹.

The study of online social networks starts back to the beginning of the '90s when computer-mediated communications were then a cutting edge in growing computer-related research in LAN-networked organizations.

Unfortunately, most works focused on the social impacts of such technology and their ethical dimension did not meet much interest and still is not raising much interest beside privacy-related problems. Since these first studies, interests in online social networks have followed the fast expansion of the Internet and some ethical issues emerged. In his pioneering work, Howard Rheingold (1993) raises some ethical questions about online social networks such as right to privacy, net-dependence, how to build a social network's communitarian rules, intellectual property rights, personal identity, private firms intrusion into the Internet government². Especially the latter problem has increasing importance and it is widely discussed outside the online social networks field, too³.

In 2008, the booming of Facebook and other popular social networks such as Twitter all over the world, has started to raise scholarship interests especially when Facebook and Twitter eventually became the standards for online social networking. While such phenomenon was studied only at the level of developed countries, ethical and political analyses were limited to the nature of social exchanges in such online social networks, too. In this context, according to Candler

"Network websites are popular for two key reasons: firstly offering convenience and accessibility to large groups of people, and secondly their ability to define, promote and control perception of identity. It seems Facebook has provided the opportunity to maximise quantity and dilute quality as we hurriedly reach our social 'orgasm' through 15 second status updates, disingenuous photo comments and the ever superfluous 'poke'"⁴.

Marturano and Bellucci, on the other hand, argued that

"Facebook is realizing what Guy Debord calls 'the invasive forces of the 'spectacle' - 'a social relation between people that is mediated by images': Facebook is seen as an alternative tool able to amplify an individual's alienation and narcissism, which, are a consequence of the mercantile form of social organization which has reached its climax in capitalism. Under Marxist theory, Facebook does not appear what Jaron Lanier claims to be collaborative communities"⁵.

The authors finally argue that, in mature capitalistic countries "Facebook is not (as Tapscott and Williams claim) a promising example of a new shift from capitalism to a new form of economy based on openness,

1 Garton, Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 1997

2 Rheingold (1993), cit., ch. 3.

3 For a good updated discussion, see Jack Goldsmith and Tim Wu (2008): Who Controls the Internet? Illusions of a Borderless World, Oxford: Oxford UP.

4 Candler (2010)

5 Marturano and Bellucci (2009)

peering, sharing and global action - which they called Wikinomics (Tapscott and Williams, 2006); but rather new disguised forms of advanced capitalism aimed at eroding space to more challenging modes of Internet collectivism". In fact, no revolution happened in any country with mature capitalistic economic system (such as Italy) despite the violent economic contraction caused by the continuing financial crisis and, at least in Italy, to the deep political corruption.

Many authors have, on the contrary, argued that online social networks have played a fundamental role in the recent North African revolutions and therefore boosted social collectivisation in those totalitarian countries. In most countries in the Arab world, Facebook is now one of the 10 most-visited Web sites, and in Egypt it ranks third, after Google and Yahoo. About one in nine Egyptians has Internet access, and around 9 percent of that group are on Facebook — a total of almost 800,000 members (Shapiro, 2009). According to Eunice Crook

"the Jasmine revolution, a term rejected by Tunisians, but in fact it was and is a Facebook revolution ... everyone in Tunisia, from grandmothers down, now has a Facebook account. One colleague told me last week that everyone was so busy talking to their friends on Facebook each night that face to face family conversation had almost come to an end".⁶

This flare-up of political activity coincided with the moment North-Africans were starting to gain access to the Internet in large numbers. Home computers and Internet cafes were becoming more popular, and the cost of getting online was dropping. Very importantly, new technologies and political movements grew symbiotically; Facebook and other online social networks became the main source of information for people's activism, which were largely ignored by the state-run media (Shapiro, 2009). Finally, social networking turned disaffected young Egyptians into a force for democratic change.

Such different outcomes in online social network uses are likely a reflection of different levels of totalitarianism and difference in culture, morality and religious framework. However an analysis of these phenomena falls outside the scope of this introduction which has the scope of offering new insights for debates in this area.

In this special issue I hope to have offered a place to bridging this ethical gap as we have collected here a huge number of papers which topics range from the problem of privacy to surveillance, from ethical issues of managing online social networks to file sharing ethical problems. While not exhaustive of the magnitude of ethical problems online social networks can offer, this selection will offer a close look to the most popular ones.

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⁶ Eunice Crook (2011)

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