Introducing Digital Media Ethics

Ess, Charles (2009), Polity Press: Cambridge, pp6-13

It is now commonplace to observe that in the industrialized world, we – especially young people – are thoroughly interconnected through, and thereby saturated with, what are sometimes called "New Media" or digital media. [...] Certainly, if we pay attention to contemporary media reports about digital media, these reports shout out important, often frightening, ethical issues.

So, for example, my local newspaper recently reported on a local pastor – and mayor of a small town – who was captured in an online sting operation. An "Internet detective" posing as a young girl in a chatroom enticed the 62-year-old man, hoping to meet up with the "girl" for sex, into revealing his identity (O'Dell 2008).

Somewhat more subtly, the Danish newspaper *Nyhedsavisen* (which enjoys one of the largest circulations in Denmark) recently reported that two new words have been added to the dictionaries of mobile phones – *fråderen* ("foaming," slang for "hungry") and *luder* ("slut"). The sub-headline to the story read: 'An expert wonders whether this means in the long run that young people's language will develop in a negative direction' (Mainz 2007:14). (To be sure, an additional expert quoted in the story comments that this development is simply another reflection of how all languages change – and that such changes are not necessarily reasons for panic.)

What these examples illustrate is the tendency of popular media to call our attention to important ethical issues involved with digital media – but in ways that run the risk of fostering what are called "moral panics." That is, in order to attract our attention, such media stories focus unduly on the sensational (if not the sexual). But thereby, they tend to appeal to a deep-seated fear that our new technologies are somehow getting out of control (a fear that has been expressed in the modern West since Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* ([1818 1933) – in part, as these new technologies apparently threaten to corrupt our ethical and social sensibilities.

As we will see in subsequent chapters, this media approach is most pronounced (understandably enough) with regard to sex and violence – specifically, concerns about pornography online and violence in video games. But here we can start to see how such a "moral panic" style of reporting both furthers and frustrates careful ethical reflection on digital media.

On the one hand, to be sure, such reporting succeeds in getting our attention – and thereby provides a useful service by catalyzing more careful reflection on important ethical issues evoked by digital media. On the other hand, by highlighting especially the potential *negative* effects of digital media, such reporting fosters a polarized way of thinking – an approach that could be characterized as "technology good" (because it brings us important benefits) vs. "technology bad" (because it threatens the moral foundations of society, most especially the morality of young people). The problem is

that such an approach to thinking about important ethical issues is simply misleading. As we will see – and as most of us probably already know full well – whatever truths may be discerned about the ethics of digital media often lie somewhere in the middle between these two extremes. But if we are only presented with the simple choice between "technology good" and "technology bad," we may be tempted to think that these are indeed our only choices and get stuck in trying to choose between two compelling alternatives. Getting stuck in this way short-circuits what we need to do if we are to move beyond such either/or thinking – a movement that requires more careful and extensive reflection.

One way to see how to move beyond such polarities is first to examine more carefully some of the important characteristics of digital media, along with the specific sorts of ethical issues that these characteristics often raise for us.

(Ethical) life in the digital age?

"Digital media" are the subject of an extensive range of analyses in a number of disciplines (e.g., Lievrouw and Livingstone 2006). This book, however, takes the standpoint of an interest in digital media ethics; thereby, at least at the beginning, we are interested in seeing the distinctive features of digital media – what sets them apart from earlier media – that make them ethically challenging and interesting.

To be sure, digital media represent strong *continuities* with earlier forms of communication and information media such as printed books, journals, and newspapers, what we now call "hard-copy" letters, and, for example, traditional forms of mass media that include not only newspapers but also "one-to-many" broadcast media such as radio and TV. We will note and explore these continuities more fully in our efforts to evaluate one of the larger *ethical* questions we will confront – namely, do digital media present us with radically *new* kinds of ethical problems that thereby require absolutely new ethical approaches? For now, we can note that these questions are driven in good measure by rather emphasizing the important *differences* between earlier media and digital media. (Such an emphasis, by the way, also drives the "either/or" approach underlying much popular media reporting.) In particular, these differences often are part of why new ethical issues come up in conjunction with digital media. Exploring these differences at the outset thus seems like a good idea.

Here, then, we will consider three distinguishing characteristics of digital media (though others are important): how digital media (in contrast with analogue media) foster *convergence*; digital information as "greased"; and digital media as (global) *communication* media.

Digital media, analogue media, and convergence

To begin with, digital media work by transforming extant information (e.g., voices over a phone, texts written on a word processor, pictures of an impressive landscape, videos recorded and broadcast, etc., etc.) into the basic informational elements of electronic computers and networks, including binary code (1's and 0's – bits on and off) and the definition of how such code is to be manipulated within a given application. Digital media contrast in this way with *analogue* media – such as an old-fashioned vinyl record – that capture, store, and make information accessible by producing specific artifacts that are *like* the original. In the case of music, recording equipment, beginning with microphones and concluding with a storage medium such as audiotape, translates the vibrations of an original sound into magnetically stored information, corresponding to specific sound pitches and volumes, which is then "written" onto a tape that passes by the recording head at a specific speed. These *analogues* of an original sound are then in turn transformed into further analogues, as they are mechanically carved onto the grooves of a vinyl record in the form of bumps and valleys that correspond to (i.e., are analogues of) the high and low frequencies and volumes of the original sound. These physical variations are further translated by a phonograph needle into electronic impulses that likewise mimic the original variations of a sound. Finally, these impulses are transformed into sound by an amplifier and speaker(s) – again, as an analogue or copy of the original that, if all goes well, is as close to the original as possible.

One way to think about analogue media is that they work by capturing, recording and replaying information as a *smooth*, continuously variable content. That is, there are comparatively continuous variations as a series of musical notes, first low and soft and then high and loud, are captured and replayed as moving evenly from the one to the other. In this sense, the contents of analogue media are more or less infinitely variable. By contrast, *digital* media capture, store, and make accessible their contents based entirely on a binary code of 1's and 0's.

More importantly, analogue media always involve some loss of information across the various processes of collecting, recording, and storing it. This means – and this is particularly critical to the ethical discussions of copying – that each analogue copy of an original is always less true to the original; and the more copies made – e.g. a tape copy of a record as a copy of a tape of an original performance – the less faithful (and satisfying) the resulting copy will be. By contrast, once information is transcribed into digital form, each copy of the digital original will be (more or less) a perfect replica of the original. Copy an MP3 version of your favourite song a thousand times, and if your equipment is working properly, there will be no difference between the first copy and the thousandth copy.

Even more importantly, *analogue* media are strongly distinct systems: how information is captured in a vinyl record is not immediately compatible with – and thereby, easily exchangeable with – how information is captured and replayed in a newspaper or printed book. By contrast, once information is translated into *digital* form, such information – whether destined for an MP3 player as an audio recording, or a word processor as text – can be stored on and transmitted through a shared medium. Hence the same computer, PDA, or even smartphone, for example, can hold digital photos and music, along with word processing files, spreadsheet files, etc.

As once distinct forms of information are thus translated into a commonly shared digital form, it makes possible one of the most important distinguishing characteristics of digital media, namely *convergence*. Such convergence can be (literally) seen in a rich webpage that contains text, video and audio sources, as well as possibilities for sending email, remotely posting a comment, etc. These once distinct forms of information and communication are now conjoined in digital form, so that they can be transmitted entirely in the form of 1's and 0's via the Internet. Similarly, a contemporary cell phone further exemplifies such convergence: it is capable of not simply handling phone conversations, but also handling digital information used for a built-in camera (still and/or moving video), MP3 player, web browser capable of capturing text and other sorts of information, etc.

This means, then, that digital media bring together both traditional and sometimes new sorts of information sources. In particular, what were once distinct kinds of information in the analogue world (e.g., photographs, texts, music) are now no longer strongly distinct; rather, they share the same basic *form* of information. What does this mean, finally for ethics? Here's the key point: what were once distinct sets of ethical issues now likewise converge – sometimes creating new combinations of ethical challenges that we haven't had to face before.

For example, societies have developed relatively stable codes and laws for the issue of *consent* as to whether or not someone can be photographed in public. (In the U.S., generally, one can photograph people in public without their consent, while in Norway, consent is required.) Transmitting that photo to a larger public – e.g., through a newspaper or book – would then require a different information system, and one whose ethical and legal dimensions are addressed (however well or poorly) in copyright law. But as many people have experienced to their regret, a contemporary cell phone can not only record their status and actions, but further (more or less immediately) transmit the photographic record to a distribution medium such as a Facebook profile or even more public website. The *ethics* of both *consent* in photography and *copyright* in publication are now conjoined in new ways that we simply have not had to think through before.