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Ethics in the information age : how information ethics and digital hermeneutics can explain the reality - Facebook's privacy issues as a case study / Jonathan Lerner

Abstract

There's no argument regarding the fact that Facebook has become a crucial part of our daily life. Many of us use it to maintain our social relations with friends and family, as well as to "like", as Facebook calls it, various content items. There are many reasons for using Facebook, and "Information" – as a manifestation of data and knowledge – is the reason for them, whether for personal information sharing or for catching up on news from the real world. These reasons act as an incentive for using Facebook, but at the same time they also lead to new challenges to our privacy, for in a social digital world where personal information is easily distributed, the question of privacy becomes more relevant than ever – Do we really control our information? And if so, to what extent?

This research aims to examine the way information ethics theories can explain the reality of the digital age, especially the meaning of privacy in the information era. Two leading information ethics theories were chosen, Luciano Floridis's "Information Ethics" and Rafael Capurro's "Digital Hermeneutics". As "reality" is a general concept, the research uses Facebook's social and economic privacy issues as a case study that demonstrates real time dilemmas. It is my argument the since each theory sheds light on different aspect of privacy, their joint effect derives from their ability to complete each other. This collaboration allows presenting a based explanation on the changes of the human condition in the information society.

The first chapter defines the methodological framework of the research. It clarifies the research questions and the methodology by which the answers will be given – a qualitative-constructivist research method and its content analysis tool. In addition, the chapter defines the research candidates to content analysis – one group of documents which relates to the relationship between Facebook and its users as the basis for privacy issues, and a second group of documents which exhibits the theoretical structure of "Information Ethics" and "Digital Hermeneutics" and their views of human nature, privacy and society.

Hereafter, the research is divided to three sections. The first section consists of three chapters which review the research relevant academic literature. Chapter 1 defines what "privacy" and "information privacy" are, as well as the relationship between them. Chapter 2 outlines the evolution of the information ethics discourse from its birth till today, including its future prospects. Chapter 3 summarizes the academic literature regarding Facebook's social and economic privacy issues and sketches the reasons that allow them – on the one hand, Facebook's users usage patterns, the nature of their online social relations and their partial awareness to privacy issues; and on the other hand, Facebook's business model which encourages frequent social interaction and information revelation as a means of improving the efficiency of its surveillance mechanisms which serves Facebook's targeted advertisement platform.

The second section presents the findings reports achieved for the content analysis done on the two groups of documents. By analyzing Facebook's terms of use documents, chapter 4 reveals how the users lose control over their information and the way the information flows within and out of Facebook. This is done by showing how Facebook's terms of use gain property rights over the

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user's information, defining what exactly user "information" is, explaining the information circulation circles and the privacy management system Facebook offers to its users so they can control their the information disclosure.

Chapters 5 and 6 relate to the second group of documents. In these chapters, Floridi's Information Ethics (chapter 5) and Capurro's Digital Hermeneutics (Chapter 6) are explained using a comparative outlook – the justification of their existence, their theoretical foundations and the way they define human nature, privacy and society. It shows that Information Ethics is characterized by its structural approach, that it sees the human as an information object with an intrinsic value that engages in information exchange with other information objects. Privacy, in that sense, is analyzed in terms of information gap and information friction, that is, the amount of work one needs to do in order to gain information on the other. In addition, Information Ethics sees the assimilation of the digital era on the human society as the birth of the "Infosphere" and so it suggests moral rules that regulate the activity which takes place within in, whether human or artificial. As opposed to Information Ethics, Digital Hermeneutics focuses on the existential influences of the digital world on the human nature; with emphasis on the way the digital era changes the human self-understanding as well as the understanding of the surrounding world. In addition, it offers two definitions of privacy in the information age, personal privacy and privacy as a private property, and explores the way technologies influence the society's traditional privacy notions.

The third and final section of the research is a discussion which is spread over four chapters. Chapter 7 is a theoretical discussion that elaborates key concepts that were found in the previous chapters (chapters 5 and 6). It compares them one to the other and defines their points of resemblance and difference. Great attention is given to attributing them to the historical ethical discourse from which three anchors are brought – it demonstrates how Information Ethics applies the ideas of Aristotle and Emmanuel Kant, and how Digital Hermeneutics implements the revolutionary concepts of Martin Heidegger concerning technology. Chapters 8 and 9 apply the insights that rose from the theoretical discussion made in the previous chapter, and iv

answer how exactly Information Ethics (chapter 8) and Digital Hermeneutics (chapter 9) can explain the meaning of Facebook's social and economic privacy issues. Chapter 10 sums up the discussion; Information Ethics concentrates on the technical structure of the digital social network as undermining the human privacy, while Digital Hermeneutics completes this answer by explaining how it influences the human existence and shapes the undetachable relationship between man and society, a relationship which leads him to lose his privacy. In the end, despite of the differences between Information Ethics and Digital Hermeneutics, the discussion finds that both of them are relevant and valid in the digital age; this is due to their success in supplying adequate tools and methodologies for understating the full effects of the digital world and their ability to offer concrete solutions to regulate it.

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