



13

On the Ethics of Internet Communication

In the Spanish short film *RebuscameTV: Corto sobre el Whatsapp y las parejas*,¹ a couple meet in a café to discuss their next holiday together. Gradually, however, everything gets out of hand because Miguel concludes from an unanswered WhatsApp message that he can no longer trust his girlfriend. In the end, it is she who leaves him: If he trusts a WhatsApp communication more than a face-to-face communication, then she can no longer trust Miguel. Disappointed, she walks away and leaves the perplexed Miguel behind. Shortly afterward, his mobile phone beeps. His girlfriend has sent him one last message: a fecal emoticon that makes it pretty clear what she thinks of him.

The question this short film raises is the following: What is the status of text messages, WhatsApp messages, and e-mails compared to direct, face-to-face communication? Can they be trusted? Or are they something like second-class communication?

Philosophically, “virtual” communication is a misleading term. All communication uses different media, the oldest medium being gestures and sound waves, later cultural techniques such as writing and reading invented characters as a medium, and the invention of printing on the threshold of the modern era made this medium suitable for the masses. Contrary to what some postmodern theorists think, digitalization does not destroy the rationality of the Gutenberg age nor does it create a new world of images without logical structure; rather, it broadens the media spectrum of communicative acts. Nothing about it is virtual.

¹ Online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D5zaF61DeJQ>. Accessed 3 January 2022.

However, this means that the same rules apply to communication on the Internet as to communication in general. In the philosophy of language, there is agreement that successful communicative practice can only be achieved if those involved in communication adhere to certain constitutive rules. One of these is the rule of truthfulness. This requires that when I assert something, I myself am convinced that it is true. Similarly, we can expect our communication partners to trust us, that is, we expect them to assume that if I assert something, it will then also correspond to my own convictions. These rules are only supposedly trivial. They impose on the communication partners the obligation to base their utterances on good reasons and not on their self-interest. In many cases, self-interest will diverge from the rules of truthfulness and trust—but not in all. If we were always untruthful, if this were in our interest, then the communicative act would abruptly lose value.

The meaning of an utterance is closely related to the intentions of the person making the utterance. This close connection is dissolved in the case of untruthful utterances. An utterance then no longer has the usual meaning, but we first have to find out what intentions lie behind this utterance. Take, for example, scenes from a spy film from the times of the Cold War: a spy is talking to his colleague about further measures and is being eavesdropped on by the spy of the opposing side, but the latter must assume that the spy assumes that he is being eavesdropped on, so he will express himself in such a way that false expectations are raised on the opposing side. The meaning of the utterance shifts in relation to the meaning of the same utterance when it is made truthfully.

Beyond truthfulness and trust, our communicative acts must be appropriately connected to reality. It is not enough for people to communicate truthfully and trustfully, they must also ensure that their beliefs have a real content. One can also be truthful when one is mistaken but unable to recognize this mistake. Often people find it easier to be truthful without telling the truth. It is often tedious to check one's own beliefs in order to be reliable in one's communication. Sometimes it seems natural to forego verification in order not to have to give up cherished opinions. This also applies to the self-reinforcing mechanisms of internet communication. The fact that once expressed convictions and interests are supported by similarly minded people gives this third principle of successful communication increased importance in times of digital transformation.

Just as the whole of everyday communication is based on adherence to certain universally accepted norms and rules, such as those of truthfulness, trust, and reliability, the same is true of the Internet, where without functioning norms of ethos, communication erodes. At times, the anonymity of

internet communication, the absence of the face-to-face situation, and the possibility of communicating under aliases such as the following promotes manipulative and exploitative practices that violate the rules of truthfulness, trust, and reliability:

Sender: dannywill01@outlook.com (received on the account of Nathalie Weidenfeld on April 6, 2017)

Dearest One,

I am Daniel Williams Coulibaly 22 years old boy from Ivory Coast in West Africa, the son of Late Ibrahim Coulibaly.

I know this mail will come to you as a surprise. My late father was an Ivory Coast's best-known military leader. He died on Thursday 28 April 2011 following a fight with the FRCI, Republican Forces of Ivory coast.

I am constrained to contact you because of the maltreatment which I am receiving from our step mother and my uncle's. Please, I need your assistance to transfer my inheritance and come over to your country to start a new life altogether. Kindly get back to me and you can indicate your options towards assisting me.

Regards,

Daniel W. Coulibaly.

Here, the implausibility is obvious, one can see that a deception is planned. The appeal for sympathy increases the reluctance of the addressees. But among them there must be some gullible ones who accept such offers, otherwise such e-mails would not continue to be sent.

Another but related problem is Fake News. Whether it is the news that IS has called for Hillary Clinton to be elected (10th most viral Fake News in 2016) or that President Trump wants to pay every Mexican willing to leave the country a one-way ticket (4th)—news like this unsettles citizens and voters who are manipulated with the spread of false reports. Even though there has of course always been fake news in media history, in times of globalized Internet communication, they are gaining unprecedented power. Does this mean that we are increasingly living in a world of insincere communication because of virtual communication?

If the rules of truthfulness, trust and reliability are violated sufficiently often, this devalues entire areas of communication, or rather, in these areas, due to the lack of truthfulness, trust, and reliability, due to the lack of a shared background of reasons and convictions, no genuine communication takes place. Reassuringly, the practice of deliberate deception can only work parasitically, that is, only if the majority of the communication partners abide by the rules of truthfulness, trust, and reliability. This still seems to be the case.

Even gamers or computer players who assume virtual identities in virtual worlds seem to attach importance to the fact that these identities are not only related to their real identities but also act truthfully, trustfully, and reliably. On the website of the forum association *World of Players*² for example, one can find the following statements:

I behave in the WoG pretty much like I do in real life. I give my honest opinion and would never pretend to be someone else. I'm also not quick-tempered, and if I have something to criticise, I watch what I say and how I say it, very similar to RL.

I actually behave the same way online as I do in real life. The only time I pretend is to play a trick on someone. Otherwise, I don't see the point in pretending. It can only be a disadvantage. I also think it's really bad when male users pretend to be female. Everyone should always represent what they are.

Well, I try to behave in the forums/chats as I would in real life. Because first of all it would be hard for me to change, besides it can also have disadvantages. At the latest when you meet at a CT, I think you notice immediately whether you've been pretending or not. I actually behave the same way as in RL, but I can express myself better because of the anonymity!

Comments like these show that most social media groups, whether closed or open, are openly characterized by truthfulness, trust, and reliability. The almost excessive use of ethos norms and the rigid sanctioning via shitstorms and individual expressions of displeasure are indicative of this. The less legal sanctions a communication has, the more important cultural practice becomes.

Many people fight unethical communication practices on the Internet. For example, as a result of increasing distrust of fake news, internet communities have sought to create a reliable community identity through rigid self-imposed norms and access restrictions. A famous example is the internet project Wikipedia, which—supported by a strict ethos of epistemic rationality—has meanwhile presumably become the most widely used source of knowledge for mankind. By mutually controlling themselves, the participants strive for the greatest possible objectivity. Even if very few of those working together on a Wikipedia article will ever meet in person, most cooperate, bound by the common ethos, truthfully, trustfully, and reliably in the dissemination of genuine knowledge.

²Online at: <https://forum.worldofplayers.de/forum/threads/64316-Euere-virtuelle-Identit%C3%A4t>. Accessed 3 January 2022.

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