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Online Ethics During COVID-19 Pandemic

Daniela BAIASU¹

Abstract

Ethics represents an important role in any society, applicable to all activities. Online information, during its evolution, applied many changes in all the domains, changes that may affect the principles of ethics. The continued freedom to use the online environment, the failure to establish clear rules both nationally and internationally can lead to many problems, most of which are ethical. Although ethics is an important value of society, in reality, it serves as an established virtue. This paper reveals the fact that the limits of ethics can be easily violated, showing which possible dangers can be met and, with attention, avoided. Using the Internet has become a priority in any domain: economic, cultural, academic, educational, and social. The most obvious change could be observed at the social level. Thus, more and more people prefer to socialize online, through social networks. Within these networks, most cases of violation of ethical norms can be observed. That is why certain ethical standards should be set clear enough to protect the privacy of users. The restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic have led more and more people to use the online environment (online work, online education). With the increase in the rate of use of the online environment, online illegalities have also increased, legalities that violate the principles of ethics. We must not neglect that any action in the online environment exposes the user to certain risks. We consider online users must get informed about possible risks and problems that may arise from browsing online. Thus, good information of the population, as well as continuously updated legislation, can help to respect the norms of ethics in the online environment

Keywords: *ethics, online, information, social networks.*

¹ National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania, daniela_baiasu@yahoo.com

1. Introduction

According to Goldfarb and Pritchard (2007), ethics can be defined as “that which is right or wrong, good or bad, fair or unfair, responsible or irresponsible, obligatory or permissible, praiseworthy or reprehensible. It is associated with guilt, shame, indignation, resentment, empathy, compassion, and care. It is interested in both character and conduct. It addresses both to public policy and to personal issues” (Goldfarb & Pritchard, 2007, p. 19). Online navigation brings responsibility both to the person that uses it, and to his/hers society. Therefore this “becomes a synthesis between ethics and pragmatic-utilitarian” (Croitor, 2014).

Ethics is considered a moral action, and according to Ulrich (2008) the notion of ethics includes “moral rights, obligations and socially valid behavioral norms deriving from a culture-specific tradition” (Ulrich, 2008).

The online environment is constantly evolving with advantages and disadvantages. Although there is almost unlimited access to a vast amount of information, among the problems encountered we can also list human behavior, which leads to violations of ethical principles. Among the human facts that lead to the creation of problems, we can list illegal access, electronic theft, creation of malware, racism, online aggression, etc. Our reaction to such behavior may shape online communication in the future.

According to Clamp, among the negative effects that have manifested in the online environment, we find xenophobia, racism, the spread of misinformation, and online conspiracy theories (Clamp, 2020).

The impact of the internet is beneficial and profound but with the associated risks. “The rapid evolutions of ITC technologies and applications, the entry into the labor market of the M generation have contributed to the increase of favorability for telework” (Grigorescu & Mocanu Nicolae, 2020, p. 383). The social and economic environment has been altered by three positive principles of the Internet: connecting everyone, closing the loop (any initiative can receive feedback), and empowering individuals (Stephenson, 2003).

With the manifestation of the coronavirus pandemic, starting with 2019, more and more people have had to use the online environment for both professional and personal activities, such as job responsibilities, social networks, educational programs, shopping, entertainment, online games. Thus, more and more companies worldwide were forced to close their business, and others were able to cope with this period by approaching online work. Although they approached new operating strategies, all areas suffered economically.

According to a forecast of the European Commission, in 2020 the economic zone of the European currency contracted with a record value of 7¾% and will increase by 6¼% in 2021. Also, as the above mentioned source informed, the EU economy will contract by 7% in 2020, to grow by about 6% in 2021(European Commission, 2020).

2. State of the Arts

Ethics as an academic discipline addresses the principles that affirm something about good human actions. As Monteiro mentioned, three types of ethics describe its scope(Reis Monteiro, 2014):

- *Descriptive (or empirical)* ethics describes the multiple aspects of practiced morality and the habits of individuals, groups, institutions, and cultures;
- *Normative ethics* examines existing attitudes towards morality and frames action-oriented norms;
- *Meta-ethics* critically examines ethical methods and extends them.
- Weber (2015) identified ethical values that are relevant to the development of the information society, as follows (Weber, 2015):
 - *Freedom* - in the online context the freedom to express the opinions, and the freedom of information access develop;
 - *Justice/equity* – the individuals respect cultivates justice, and the access to information in an equal and equitable way allow the society's members to develop a bilateral understanding;
 - *Care and compassion* - respect and empathy lead to mutual support and solidarity;
 - *Participation* - for making important decisions it is essential that individuals manifest their right to participate in these processes;
 - *Sharing* - the ability to exchange information and knowledge in the online environment leads to the creation of lasting relationships between individuals in a society and thus strengthens communities;
 - *Responsibility* - assuming it is a main requirement in a society, the level of responsibility resembles to each individual's level of capacity;
 - *Sustainability* - sustainable projects are of great importance to all individuals in a society, they are essential for the protection of a sustainable environment.

Unfortunately, the ethical values listed, although linked, are often violated online. As I mentioned, one of the problems is human behavior. With the emergence, identification, and definition of such issues, authorities

in several states have begun to issue laws, allowing legal authorities to intervene in this area (Branscomb, 1990).

Over time, technologies for detecting viruses, encrypting, and decrypting information have been developed. Knowledge of the safety of operating systems and the detection of potential hazards has also been improved. All safety and precautionary measures must be updated frequently, as technology evolves rapidly, and with it the dangers.

According to a statistic compiled by Statista in January 2021, there were 4.66 billion active internet users worldwide - 59.5% of the global population. Of this total, 92.6% (4.32 billion) accessed the internet via mobile devices (fig. 1). An increase can be observed compared to April 2020, when there were over 4.57 billion internet users in total, according to the same sources (Statista, 2021).

Fig. 1. Global digital population in January 2021

source: www.statista.com

According to internetworldstats.com, most online users are in Asia (51.8%), followed by Europe (14.8%), Africa (12.8%), Latin America (9.5%), North America (6.8%), the Middle East (3.7%) and Oceania/ Australia (0.6%) (Fig. 2) (Internet World Stats, 2021).

Fig. 2. Internet users distribution in the world – 2020 Q3

source: www.internetworldstats.com

With an increasing number of internet users, we can expect the number of irregularities to increase. More and more people are using the online environment to inform themselves and to socialize, methods by which most irregularities can occur. Thus, according to similarweb.com, in April 2021, when the restrictions imposed by the pandemic were applied worldwide, the most visited sites were: Google (27.68%), YouTube (21.30%), and Facebook (32.54%) (Table 1) (Similarweb, 2021).

Table 1. Most visited websites

source: www.similarweb.com

Rank	Website	Category	Bounce Rate
1	google.com	Computers Electronics and Technology > Search Engines	27.68%
2	youtube.com	Arts and Entertainment > TV Movies and Streaming	21.30%
3	facebook.com	Computers Electronics and Technology > Social Networks and Online Communities	32.54%
4	twitter.com	Computers Electronics and Technology > Social Networks	30.13%

Rank	Website	Category	Bounce Rate
		and Online Communities	
5	instagram.com	Computers Electronics and Technology > Social Networks and Online Communities	35.69%
6	wikipedia.org	Reference Materials > Dictionaries and Encyclopedias	57.70%
7	baidu.com	Computers Electronics and Technology > Search Engines	20.64%
8	yahoo.com	News and Media	35.50%
9	yandex.ru	Computers Electronics and Technology > Search Engines	24.13%
10	xvideos.com	Adult	21.01%

“The benefits of technology can lead, intentionally or unintentionally, to breaches of ethical standards in obtaining and using information from open sources” (Baiausu, 2020, p. 87). So far, according to Statista, ethics regarding the distribution process has been discussed only in terms of intellectual property, security, and the right to an opinion (Stalder & Sützl, 2011). The information obtained online can be useful but, on the other hand, can create damage, especially morale.

The possibility of having access to a large amount of information is an asset, offering many possibilities. Finding a lot of data from various fields is a financial advantage but also in terms of time and comfort. It is also a quick way for officials to inform the public, for example in the case of press releases.

Internet access can endanger anyone, but the most exposed are children, and their supervision and online activity are necessary. Also, the dependence of more and more people on social networks is an "opportunity" for violating both the law and ethical norms. The fact that users expose their lives on social networks can easily lead to identity theft and the use of information by third parties, without seeking the consent of the owner.

On the other hand, any device connected to an internet network is subject to certain risks. There have been many cases when official/ personal data and information have been made public without the consent of the holder. The most common situations are encountered in political and economic circles (Dawson et al., 2021).

A phenomenon that has become widespread in recent years in the online environment is what is known as fake news. This is largely incorrect information that is intended to be shared but may also be undesirable. There are many reasons for non-compliance with ethical principles in the case of fake news: political, economic, or social, by manipulating public opinion. On the other hand, involuntary misinformation can appear due to lack of information, and this cannot be considered fake news if "information error is reported" (Rini, 2017, p. 44).

Lazer et al. defined fake news as "fabricated information that mimics new media content as a form but not as an organizational process or intent" (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1094). People who accept fake news get it, for the most part, from social media but also from certain sources about which there is not much information, and have "reduced availability to think critically or to verify the information" (Rini, 2017, p. 43).

Regarding fake news, we can observe that there are two types of sites working in the circulation of fake news:

- *stand-alone sites* - are pages created to provide false, unverified information. The fact that the site does not have a background should raise some question marks to people who access it and read the information provided;

- *sites that copycat official websites or media outlets* - are identical to the official ones, from the URL to the structure of the site. Clones of official sites offer great credibility among people who are unfamiliar with this phenomenon, or who are not informed about information from several sources. These sites are used intentionally and have consequences in all areas: economic (eg changes in economic markets, international stock exchanges), political (denigration of certain public persons), social. The consequences of using fake news on such sites promoted data fabrication,

social actions, and economic measures. All that had an impact on politics, public opinion, etc.

To avoid misinformation and to be well informed, any Internet user must pay attention both to the source from which they use the information and to the information itself. Therefore, it is often essential to check information from several sources and whether it is possible to use official or known sources. In our opinion, from an ethical point of view, blocking a site should be done if these sites violate ethical principles.

Local and international authorities have put in place various measures to block sites that violate the law. On the point of Tambini, an associate of the Institute for Public Policy Research, “in most cases monitoring and verifying information would be sufficient as measures” (Tambini, 2017, p.1). Thus, by careful monitoring as well as by checking the information that appeared, many inconveniences can be avoided.

To combat illegalities in the online environment, the authorities of many countries have taken measures such as: setting up expert groups to deal with irregularities (Australia, Canada, Sweden, Denmark, Indonesia), imprisonment (Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Egypt, Israel, Italy), fines (USA, Brazil, Chile, Russia, Croatia, Ireland), stopping internet access (India). They have also developed information campaigns on possible dangers.

3. Research methodology

The imposition of restrictive measures due to the pandemic has led to much greater use of the online environment. At the same time, the cases of illegalities (cybercrime) have increased.

To highlight the violation of ethical norms in the online environment during the pandemic, we created a questionnaire distributed online through social networks, with the possibility of distribution. The questionnaire included 6. closed questions highlighting the problems encountered by internet users during the pandemic. Thus, we distributed the questionnaire at the beginning of April, and the time allotted to answer the questionnaire was three weeks. The questionnaire was distributed by 2,358 people, and 1,962 people answered it, aged between 24 and 43 years, of which 58% are female and 42% male. The distribution of answers was as follows: In the first week, 778 respondents answered, in the second week 678, and the third week 506. It can be seen that in the first week the highest number of respondents was registered, which is continuously decreasing until the last week.

Through the questionnaire, we found out that, during the pandemic, all respondents used the Internet daily, 87.2% at least 5 times a day online, and 12.8% fewer times a day. Respondents used online services to access social networks (87.6%), applications required to attend courses/required for the job (76.5%), payment of bills (74.9%), payment of taxes (12, 9%), information related to the pandemic and the measures taken (45.1%), shopping (83.9%), catering services (49.8%) and entertainment (68.2%).

4. Results

As many people had to use both specific applications and email, and in the context of the pandemic, we wanted to find out how many respondents noticed phishing attacks (obtaining delicate information or data, such as usernames, passwords, credit card numbers, by imitating a trusted body). Of these, 56.3% stated that they observed, 3% did not know, and 40.7% stated that they did not observe (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3. Internet users observing phishing attack

source: author's proceedings

We also wanted to find out if respondents read/observed fake news. 72.9% answered that they observed, and 27.1% did not observe.

A specialized culture is needed to observe any problems. Thus, 51% of respondents stated that, to a large extent, they know cyber risks. 28.3% stated that they have to some extent, 11.6% to a small extent, and 9.1% not at all (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. Internet users' protection measures

source: author's proceedings

To the question “*In which part of the online environment do you consider that most irregularities take place?*” 62.7% answered that within social networks, 19.2% via email, 8.3% on the website unofficial information, and 3.8% on shopping sites (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5. Online irregularities

source: author's proceedings

As mentioned, taking protective measures at both personal and organizational levels helps any user to avoid, to some extent, possible problems. That is why we wanted to know the opinion of the respondents regarding the protection measures taken by them. For this, we used a multiple-choice question. Thus, 83% of respondents opted for antivirus, 12.1% mentioned that they changed their passwords more often, and 23.8% updated their programs (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6. Internet users' protection measures

source: author's proceedings

When asked "Do you consider that the authorities are taking sufficient measures to combat possible irregularities in the online environment?", 94.8% of respondents said no, and 5.2% said yes.

5. Conclusions

On the one hand, the rules of ethics and the online environment involve a "struggle" that can bring a lot of damage, both economically and socially. On the other hand, the online environment can offer many possibilities from many points of view, but especially in the information field. As shown, the violation of ethical norms is easy to achieve and, unfortunately, it happens quite frequently. That is why online users must be aware of and responsible for their actions. Also, the protection of personal or work devices should not be neglected.

Both companies and individuals should consider some measures to protect both devices and personal data.

Among the necessary measures, we can list: using full-service Internet security services, setting strong passwords, updating software, efficiently managing settings for social networks, tracking children's activity online, taking action against data theft.

That is why we recommend increased attention to the navigation methods, the accessed sites, as well as on the data provided online. We also believe that more programs would be needed to inform the public about

possible risks, as well as a continuous updating of legislation that could help to comply with ethical rules in the online environment.

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