

## Digital Ethics in Social Media

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**Abstract:** *At the heart of every individual is a code of ethics, a code that must be used when making any decision. People develop a sense of ethics based on culture, faith, and ethnicity, which makes each unique. Using online information, and most social media, most cases of violation of ethical norms can be observed. Social media encompasses and covers a large scale of websites, but the link between all of these sites is the ability of users to interact. Although, not long ago it seemed just a trend that skeptics have claimed and insisted will not be successful, is now attracting more users than ever before as it grows by billions of dollars, evolving to the point where if you don't exist in online as a person, but especially as an organization, you can't succeed. All the actions a social user makes make him/her vulnerable, and that is why during time ethical standards were set clear to protect users' rights and privacy.*

*The changes in the Internet over the last two decades have led to major changes in people's lives. Thus, online activity has become a Wild West, which has led to Cyber Ethics - a philosophical study of ethics on the Internet. In-depth information from online users can lead to the avoidance of fake news as well as the avoidance of certain risks.*

*Through this paper, we highlight that many principles of ethics are violated, mostly knowingly. Many social media players violate these principles to obtain various financial benefits, manipulate, and misinform. With each passing day, we notice more and more illegal information about economic, political, and social events.*

*A correct information process and appropriate and up-to-date legislation can lead to respect for both human rights and ethical values.*

**Keywords:** *ethics; social media; propaganda; fake news; Cyber Ethics.*

**How to cite:** Grigorescu, A., & Baiasu, D. (2023). Digital Ethics in Social Media. In A. Grigorescu & V. Radu (vol. ed.), *Lumen Proceedings: Vol. 19. Global Ethics - Key of Sustainability (GEKOS 2022)* (pp. 12-24). LUMEN Publishing House. <https://doi.org/10.18662/lumproc/gekos2022/02>

## 1. Introduction

The concept of the word ethics includes the fundamental attitudes and characteristic habits of a human group, tribe, people, nation, such as the African, Romanian and American ethos. Etymologically speaking, the word ethics is based on at least two fundamental meanings, namely the individual character, which is related to the traits of a person and the social norms that guide and govern people's behavior, setting the boundaries between what is good and what is bad (Singer, 2006).

At the heart of every individual is a code of ethics, a code that must be used when making any decision. People develop a sense of ethics based on culture, faith, and ethnicity, which makes each unique. Thus, according to Ulrich (2008), the notion ethics includes *"moral rights, obligations and socially valid behavioral norms deriving from a culture-specific tradition"*.

The Internet, as a tool, has significantly contributed to the technological and scientific progress of mankind. The multitude of opportunities it offers and easy access to every citizen, with the lack of a unitary legislative framework at an international level, effective and concrete control over the development of some applications (Grigorescu & Chitescu, 2018).

Social networks are interactive technologies and digital channels that facilitate the creation and sharing of information, ideas, interests, and other forms of expression through communities and virtual networks (Obar & Wildman, 2015).

Social media is, normally, used to document memories, learn and explore things, advertise and form friendships. They can also be an effective marketing tool for corporations, entrepreneurs, non-profit organizations, political parties and governments. On the other hand, in recent years, there has been an increase in cases where networks have been and are used by various people, social movements that use social networks as a tool for communication and organization in times of political turmoil.

## 2. State of the arts

Establishing a set of ethical values in the online environment is problematic because the expansion of the Internet and related services are attracting the lives of more and more people, and this environment should be regulated, and certain laws imposed. The Internet and the online environment tends to self-govern, to self-censor, to remove the elements that can harm it, without the need for the direct intervention of any

institution. However, safe browsing on the Internet and the responsible use of available resources represent a factor of common interest, both for users and for operators or sponsors who provide this service (Necula, 2014).

Guidelines no. 8/2020 of the European Committee for Data Protection define social media as *online platforms that allow the development of relationships and communities between users, a platform through which information and content are exchanged* (European Union, 2020).

As a result of the variety of standalone and embedded social networking services available today, there are some common characteristics (Boyd & Ellison, 2007):

- are interactive Web 2.0 applications based on the Internet;
- user-generated content (text posts, photos, digital videos, and data generated by all online interactions) is the lifeblood of networks;
- users create profiles specific to the service available on the web or through an application;
- online social networks are developed by connecting a user's profile with that of other people or groups.

Currently there are 6 types of social media: *social networks* - sites where users are offered the chance to build personal pages through which they can connect with friends and share content and information (Facebook, LinkedIn, Last.FM); *blogs* - the most popular form of social media that represents an online journal (Blogspot, Wordpress); *wiki* - sites that offer users the opportunity to add or edit information already existing on the site, being a common database (Wikipedia); *podcasts* - which represent a collection of audio or video materials, available by subscription or for free, through services such as Apple iTunes, Amazon or Zonga; *forums* - can be described as discussion areas in the online environment, of a community or group, whose members share a common goal or idea; content communities - represent those communities that organize and share certain types of content, such as the YouTube community for video, Flickr for photos and Del.icio.us or Blinklist for social bookmarking; *microblogging* - social networks combined with blogs through which short information (updates) are distributed online through telephone networks (Twitter, Vine) (Meifield, 2008).

Among the most popular social media sites with over 100 million registered users are: Facebook, TikTok, WeChat, Instagram, QZone, Weibo, Twitter, Tumblr, Baidu Tieba, and LinkedIn.

Social media has changed the way information is processed, users can be ignorant. Also, many online consumers do not research the information that is offered to them and very often there is a tendency to associate posts on social networks with official news sources.

We could say that in social media, ethical norms can be respected if users: are honest, respect the personal data of others, respect the relevance of information, and do not take without permission the materials (photos, ideas, videos) posted by other users. Also, the most common phenomenon, and on the rise, is that of fake news, which represents *"fabricated information that imitates new media content as a form but not as an organizational process or intention"* (Lazer et al., 2018). Users who accept and use fake news from social media have *"reduced availability to think critically or verify information"* (Rini, 2013).

Cyber ethics is defined as the philosophical study of ethics related to computers, including user behavior and what computers are programmed to do, and how this affects individuals and society (Tavani, 2013). Also, in the opinion of Spinello (2003), CyberEthics includes a code of behavior on the Internet, based on common sense and good judgment and applicable laws in the online environment, being created by users for users, each using their code of ethics to propose laws and rules governing the online environment. In reality, however, people tend to believe, when they are online, that they are invulnerable and invisible. But, any device connected to the Internet is vulnerable and as visible as possible.

The issue of digital ethics is both a social justice and core curriculum issue. Three foundational claims about digital ethics are posited: they must address both ideology and social relations; acknowledge that the personal is related to often-invisible economic exchanges; and cannot exist without a shared normative vision (Luke, 2018).

Posting personal data or different materials (informative materials, articles, videos, or photo materials) does not give the right to other users to use it, only if it receives the owner's consent. In these cases, non-compliance with ethical norms may lead to the violation of rights, such as the right to private life, intellectual property, and copyright (Baiausu, 2020). In this context, Danah Boyd, a researcher at Microsoft, stated that *"publication and free access to certain content are not equivalent to requesting that it be distributed, aggregated, or modified in any way"* (Eijkman & Weggemans, 2013).

Another phenomenon encountered in social media is anonymity. The number of users who use pseudonyms is constantly increasing, the people who act like this prefer not to provide any name, to keep a distance between real and virtual life.

On the other hand, the popularity of the sites motivated a large number of illiterate people to learn to read, and children who have access to the platforms develop their communication skills from an early age. They also had an important role from a political point of view, influencing political events such as the elections in Iran, the re-election of Barack

Obama as president of the USA (second term), and the change of the political regime in Egypt (Shirky, 2022).

According to Kober (2020), social media platforms and certain search engines create a new market, "*one where our attention is most desirable and easy to liquidate and in the face of the unethical conduct of these platforms extensive regulation and, most likely, it will thus lead to the birth of a new generation of rights, digital rights*". The principles that will be the basis of digital rights are:

- The principle of the predominance of human rights, freedoms and interests over those of corporations - if at the beginning of the appearance of the networks, the regulations in the matter were in the interest of the social media developer companies, this is changing, the regulations being focused on the user;

- The principle of collective protection – acceptance of cookies (data collection policy) by users to access a site;

- The principle of confrontation of power – removing the monopoly of companies through the legislative and financial articulation of ethical responsibility and legal responsibility through legal instruments capable of guaranteeing against anti-competitive acts, monopoly and unethical practices;

- Repairing problems from the root – GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) is a temporary solution in case of violation of personal rights and freedoms, but the relationship of people with technology must be brought to a common denominator so that it is no longer violated either a fundamental right of the social media user;

- The principle of prevention - anticipation of possible risks;

- The principle of complexity - the problems that have arisen are complex, ramified, and in order to achieve efficiency, one should not resort to reductionism;

- Sustainability – the solutions must be sustainable.

The "actors" who violate ethical norms online are not only ordinary people, but also companies that want to obtain various benefits. Thus, Vinjamuri (2011) explained the 5 sins, in social media, that corporations should pay more attention to:

- *Unreported endorsement* - involves paying people or compensating them with goods for those people online to promote that company;

- *Anonymity* – the use, by certain employees of a company, of pseudonyms to affect the image of another competing company.

- *Compromise of customers' private information.*

- *Over-enthusiastic employees and prone to oversharing* - the appearance of information from and about the company, in the online environment, is not exactly beneficial for a company, and the manager should know about the

employees, respectively how much they are involved in the online environment and social media.

- *The use of online communities for free work*, also known as "UGC - User Generated Content", and "WFF - Work for Free" is a way of obtaining ideas and campaigns by organizing contests, after which the winners, usually experts, they are elected only with certain amounts of money without benefiting from other rights.

The lack of an authoritative authority to sanction unethical activities has led to the emergence of a multitude of ethical problems in social media, including lack of privacy, intellectual property, data security, manipulation, data theft, deception, location disclosure, invasive confidentiality agreements, and cyberstalking. From the point of view of the companies developing social networks, we can list: the terms and conditions of use are created for the company's advantage; private data is shared with different applications; social platforms are not fully technically competent as applications and plug-ins can cause users' data to be stolen in an instant; accounts, once created, cannot be permanently deleted, the related data remaining stored on the server, available to the site at any time (Necula, 2014).

### **3. Research methodology**

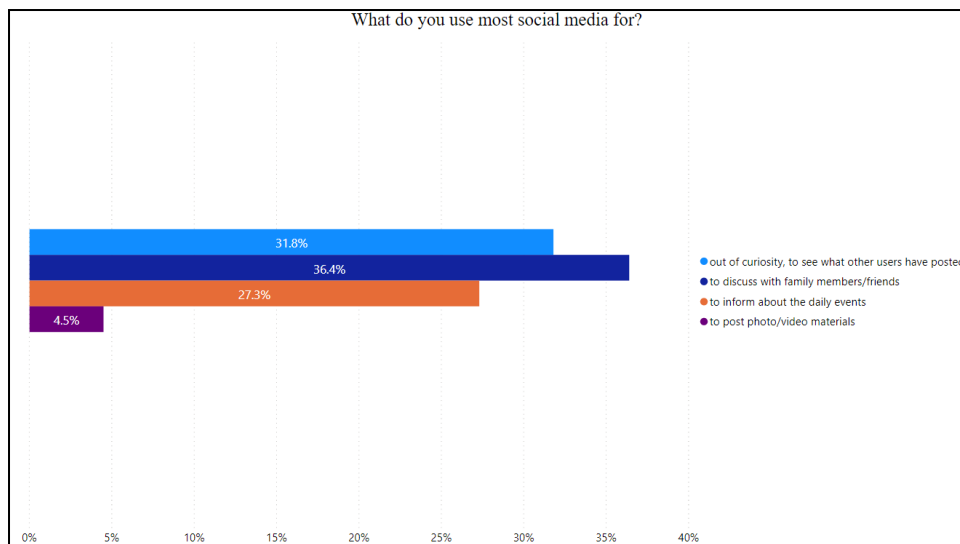
The increase in the number of social media users, as well as the appearance of new social media sites and applications, has also led to an increase in cases of fake news and violations of digital ethics.

To highlight this aspect, we created a questionnaire distributed online, through social media. The questionnaire included 7 closed questions that highlighted the respondents' "dependence" on social media, as well as their attitude towards online activity. The questionnaire was distributed over a period of 3 weeks (April 18 – May 3). The questionnaire was distributed to 1,802 people, and 1,626 responded. The respondents are aged between 18 and 56 years, of which 61% are women, and 39% are men. The distribution of answers was: in the first week, 538 respondents answered, in the second week 651, and in the third one 437 respondents. It can be seen that the highest number of respondents was recorded in the second week, and in the third, the lowest number of respondents.

Through the questionnaire we found out that all respondents access social media daily, implicitly social networks, and of these 68.2% do it at least 4 times a day, and 31.8% less often.

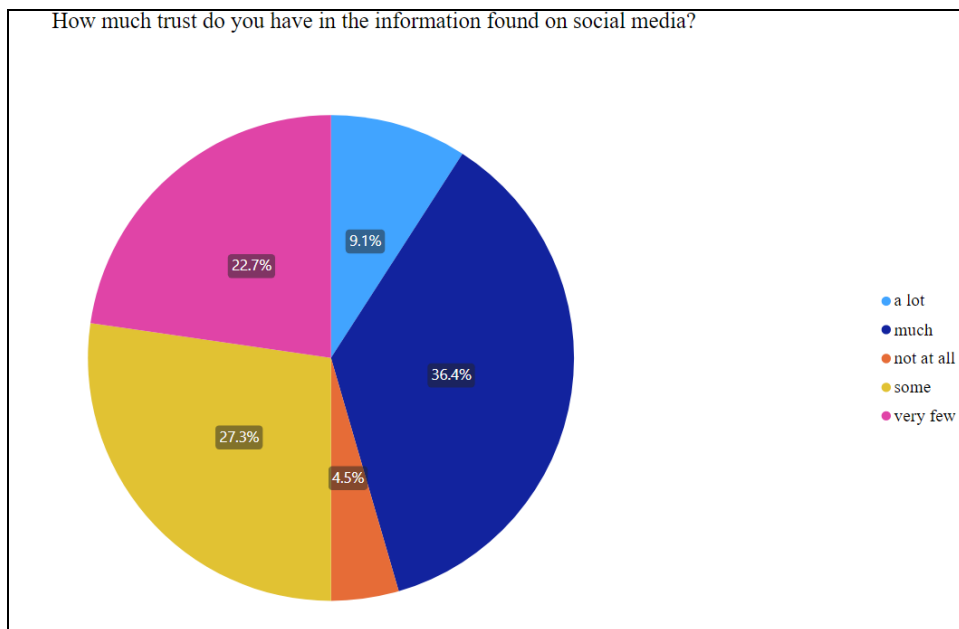
## 4. Results

As all respondents access social media, we wanted to find out what they use social networks for. 36.4% to chat with friends/family, 31.8% out of curiosity, to see what other users have posted, 27.3% to find out about current events, and 4.5% to post materials photo/video (fig. 1).



**Fig. no. 1** Usage of social media  
*source: author's proceedings*

We also wanted to find out how much trust the respondents have in the information they read through social media. 9.1% mentioned that they have a lot of trust, 36.4% have a lot of trust, 27.3% have little trust, 22.7% have very little trust, and 4.5% have no trust at all (fig. 2).

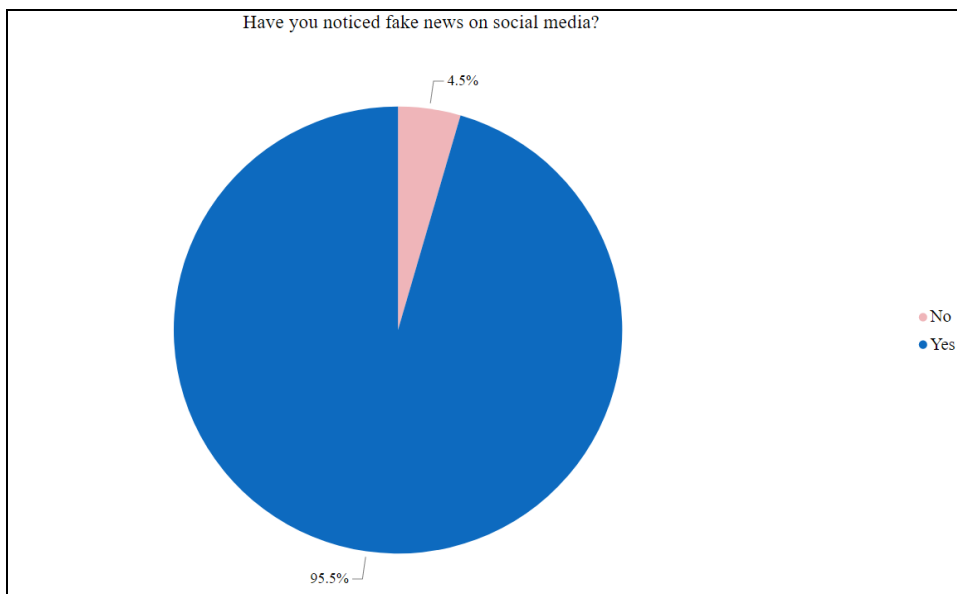


**Fig. no. 2** Users' trust in social media information  
*source: author's proceedings*

The fact that the majority of respondents have a lot of confidence in the information found in social media can also explain the phenomenon of the spread of fake news, and thus the violation of ethical norms.

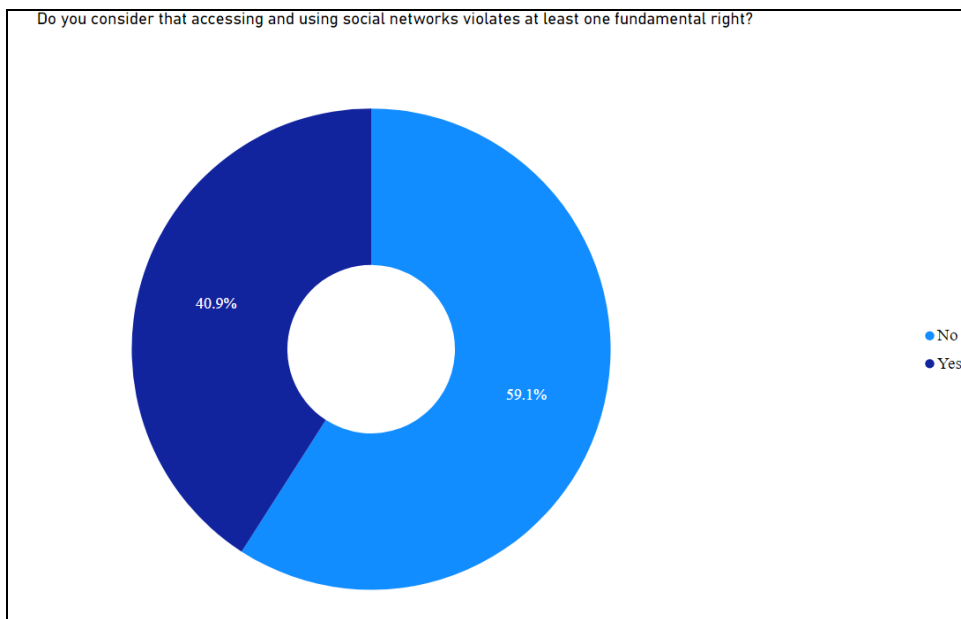
That is precisely why at the question: "Have you noticed fake news on social media?" 95.5% answered that they did, and 4.5% answered that they did not (fig. 3).





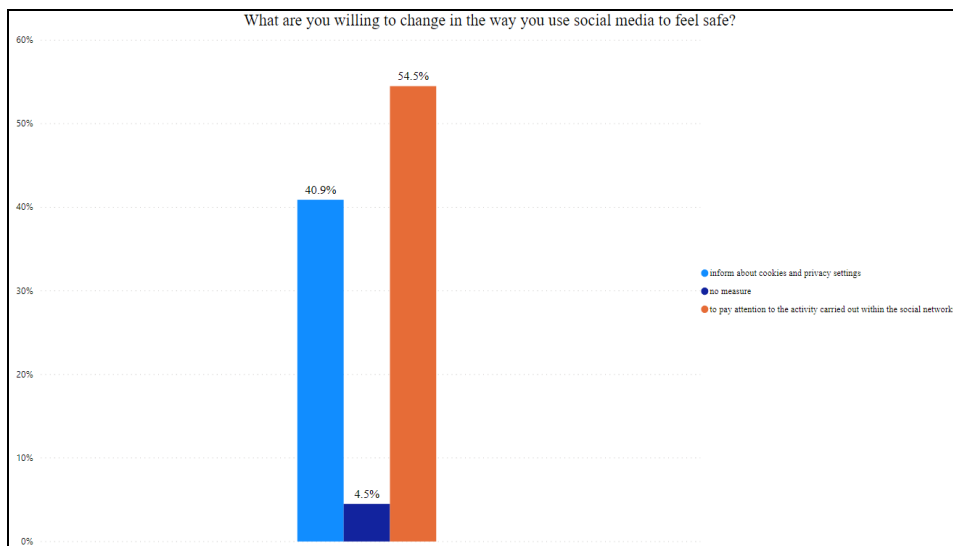
**Fig. no. 3** Fake news acknowledge  
*source: author's proceedings*

The fact that many social media users are not up-to-date in terms of digital ethics was also reflected in the answers received to the question "Do you consider that by accessing and using social networks at least one fundamental right is being violated?". Thus, 59.1% declared that they do not think so and 40.9% that they do (fig. 4).



**Fig. no. 4** Users' opinion on fundamental rights on social media  
*source: author's proceedings*

However, as measures to feel safe, the majority of respondents (54.5%) declared that they will be more attentive to the activity they carry out within social networks, 40.9% are willing to inform themselves more about privacy settings and cookies, and 4.5% will not take any action (fig. 5).



**Fig. no. 5 Possible measures for a safer navigation**

*source: author's proceedings*

## 5. Conclusions

The online environment offers both possibilities (economic, educational, informational), but also many "traps". New media has become an instrument of propaganda and social control, and the act of manipulating public opinion, of manufacturing news, is no longer considered a taboo subject.

Even if manipulation in a professional way will not be noticed, better attention of users regarding the activity carried out online can help to slow down the process of fake news and prevent the violation of digital ethical norms.

Also, there must be careful attention on the part of the authorities through the implementation of measures and the adoption of laws that provide for the protection of both legal entities and, especially, individuals.

To avoid as much as possible the effect of fake news, regulations can be adopted at a double level:

- public - by issuing related policies and sanctions by institutions or by control systems;
- private, in the hope that social media developers will modify their algorithms to exclude one narrative from users' feeds in favor of another.

Exposing your personal life on social media may seem like fun, but it can cause problems both financially and morally.

That is precisely why it is recommended higher attention to the methods of navigation, and the sites accessed, but especially to the data posted online.

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