RTV 4930

Digital Media Ethics

Overview

Where do we live these days? We live online. This is an online module examining our online behaviors.

And what makes a happy life? Everyone getting on. But the debate arises when standards of behavior for "everyone" are discussed. It is the age old-question: how should I live?

This course examines digital life, and behavior, in the 20-teens, with regard to ethics for media professionals. We review how the internet has changed human interaction. The course involves case studies, discussion, and deliberation, as well as reading and listening to fundamentals of ethical thought. Current affairs play a big part. Moral philosophy is a basis for the exploration of issues, but also important are developed and developing cultural norms. We'll also consider how different standards can apply in different societies or communities.

Credits: 3

Explorations

Throughout this unit, students will:

- Explore traditional ethical standards, and the different problems today with vast audiences and lack of regulation on the internet

- Discuss and deliberate on appropriate action when an online ethical problem arises in text, audio or video

- Identify ethical dilemmas in journalism, public relations, activism and other mass mobilization practices via the internet

- Explore the differences between visual, audio and written material

- Make and justify decisions about ethical dilemmas

- Appreciate the challenges that Facebook, Instagram, twitter and even Linked-In pose to our ethical professional life. Appreciate the challenges that the online behavior of powerful people can create.

Materials

See separate document in your Canvas folder for the reading list and recommended resources.

Milestones

First assignment: February 4

Second assignment: March 18

Third/final assignment: April 13 2022

Requirements

By the end of the semester, students will be expected to have developed these skills, all with regard to the online environment.

 critical understanding of ethics and their application to journalism and other communications professions

 appreciation of differences between communication in the online and offline environments

 awareness of current codes of behavior for media professionals, and how these fit in the online environment

Evaluation

There will be three assignments, and compulsory participation in at least one online discussion. (See Milestones) Further information will be given regularly via announcements in the Canvas area.

Programme of Study, Week by Week

First session Tuesday January 11 2022

1. Background and set-up: The **structure of cyberspace** – comparison with 'non-virtual' world in terms of personal interaction, collective intelligence, social mores. Historical difference from 'offline' scenarios and encounters. The rapid evolution of a digital world, and its implications for personal interactions and mass power. Who is in charge? (A question we will return to later in the course.) Common problems for all who "broadcast" over the internet: privacy, accuracy, free speech, respect for grief, commercial sensitivity, transparency, plagiarism.

2. **and 3. Ethics in our history –** that is, predominantly Anglo-Saxon European moral philosophy and traditions of behavior. How appropriate is this in a globalized world? What, if any, are the alternatives? Four key thinkers: Aristotle, Kant, Hobbes, Rawls. Were they right or wrong? Are their ideas truly universal – that is, do they still apply now? and how should the digital world change under their view of life and good behavior?

4. **Is Rudy right?** Now that we have considered what our ethical baselines are, we start to isolate the big issues for our behavior as professionals in communications online.
In 2018, former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani declared "truth isn't truth" and there were different versions of the truth. Is absolute truth a thing of the past, now that facts are contested by all the different voices on the internet?

5. **Free speech:** everyone has a platform – everyone can broadcast**.** How should we be wary of this power, and while respecting the First Amendment, not do harm to innocent or vulnerable people by

allowing extremist opinions to circulate? What about texting/SMS– can 'the rules' apply? Unconsidered commentary is a bad thing, but is it our right? Conflict between privacy and free speech.

6. **Privacy**: The online world is ubiquitous, on all the time, everywhere. With the (perhaps inadvertent) connivance of commercial interests and public authorities, many details on all of us are held online. And then there's our social media. How does the modern communications professional view individual privacy?

7. **Social Media**: Speed kills. And that is what undermines the fantastic connectivity of twitter, Facebook, Snapchat: we step back and take a look at the history, commercial success, and social role of these platforms. How is good behavior encouraged, or bad punished? Google set the tone by promising to "do no evil". Zuckerberg's empire, ads, Russians, etc. We will discuss if Facebook has reached critical mass, or if it is a fact of life like a church that will never go away. Required text: chapter 7, section two: *Between Ethics, Privacy, Fandom and Social Media.*

8. **Using Big Data:** Ethical use of data about individuals by companies, publishers, journalists, salespeople. Exploiting online activity for commercial or political gain.

9. **Image Conscious:** the reality – or is it - that is now available to everyone. The speed and ease of video, and how anything and everything can be filmed and uploaded. The upsides and downsides of this, and how to design rules for ourselves. Verification and impact. The rise of Snapchat, Instagram, and what ethical challenges posed by the visual.

10. **Let's talk about trust:** It underpins everything on the web, but especially, if we're talking about our professions, our credibility and hence our success. How can you ethically create trust online? Case studies.

11. **Marketing to Children:** At the same time, the most innocent and the most savvy consumers of online platforms. We'll isolate marketing online for consideration before thinking about the vulnerability of kids. Protecting children, and sensitivity surrounding images of death or injury.

12. **Artificial intelligence and ethics:** AI is coming everywhere, and if you believe the most doom-laden predictions, most of our jobs will disappear into robot world. In this session we consider how digital ethics apply to robots used in healthcare and war. We also think about the "internet of things" and any relevance this might have in media ethics.

13. **(Extra if time) The mundane and the unmentionable:** emails, porn and terrorism. How to handle brushes with porn and the dark web. New English legislation on 'verifying' the age of viewers of adult materials.

End of course work – April 5