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BOOK REVIEW

Rethinking the ethics of digital communication

Onora O'Neill: A philosopher looks at digital communication. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 150 pp, £9.99 PB

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Digital communication technologies radically transform the ways various forms of speech are disseminated, and this disrupts the ability of dominant social and ethical norms to regulate our communicative practices. In *A Philosopher Looks at Digital Communication*, Onora O'Neill disentangles the complex relationship between norms and communication in the context of emerging digital technologies. O'Neill starts by presenting what she takes to be the presuppositions of communication: accessibility, intelligibility, and assessability (Chapter 1). Every instance of communication should satisfy these conditions. *Accessibility* means that an originator's message should effectively reach its recipients. It should be *intelligible* to both originators and recipients, because there is no genuine cognitive connection between them in the absence of "a common language or other symbolic system" (4). Lastly, *assessability* requires that there are available "processes and standards for interpreting or reinterpreting others' speech acts" (5). O'Neill holds that one fundamental problem with contemporary digital communication is the intensifying tension between two of these presuppositions. Digital communication, such as social media networks, has drastically increased accessibility through expanded connectivity between users. These technologies enable a user to reach thousands of others with relatively little effort, and therefore, make recipients much more accessible (7). However, this often undermines assessability in digital communication. With a large pool of anonymous users, recipients are less able to assess others' speech acts. Not knowing the provenance of a message, they are deprived of the means of checking the originator's credentials, identifying any potential conflict of interest, and evaluating the merits of a message.

In Chapter 4, O'Neill further unpacks this line of reasoning while criticizing the initial optimism about the spread of digital communication. The target of her criticism is the idea that expanded connectivity between users would

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automatically lead to better public communication and a more open and democratic political culture (44). What lies behind this optimism seems to be the categorical rejection of conventional intermediary institutions that ensure quality control and accountability (46). This criticism is a further extension of O'Neill's argument from the first chapter. She contends that the accessibility boom led to a drastic decline in assessability because the gatekeepers of conventional media lost their ability to enforce certain ethical and epistemic norms in public discourse, e.g., the norms of accuracy and truthfulness that are widely celebrated in the ethics of journalism. When intermediaries cannot provide epistemic and ethical hygiene in public discourse, ordinary social media users are predictably overwhelmed by the noise and hostility in digital communication. Moreover, users' inability to identify the provenance of online speech undermines the culture of accountability that has historically disciplined intermediaries such as the conventional news media. It is important to note that O'Neill is not romanticizing the past, and acknowledges that such mechanisms of accountability were far from perfect (56).

In Chapters 2 and 5, O'Neill argues that some ethical frameworks and conceptual apparatus are inadequate or too narrow to develop a robust ethics of digital communication. First, she contends that the disproportionate focus on online harms is too limiting in thinking about how to address moral problems in digital communication. The main problem is that it is very difficult to predict the consequences of certain action types (18). For instance, although lying can be generally harmful, there are many exceptions where it does not cause harm. Similarly, there are examples of problematic online behavior, e.g., spreading misinformation, that sometimes fail to induce the intended harms (21). As the links between harms and categories of speech acts are unstable, O'Neill proposes that "norms and standards for action" rather than harmful consequences should play a central role in our ethical thinking about digital communication. This would include ethical norms such as civility and the duty to respect others' right to freedom of expression, as well as epistemic norms such as accuracy, consistency, and respect for evidence (24–25). These norms are fundamental standards of action whose authority would not be reducible to whether their violation generated harmful consequences. Further, they would cover a wide range of grievances about digital communication including the spread of misinformation, online polarization, and the lack of decency in digital public discourse.

Additionally, O'Neill criticizes the excessive focus on rights in Western ethical thought, which she traces back to post-World War II developments (Chapter 5, 62). One problematic implication of a rights-oriented ethical thought is that duties without counterpart rights are obscured, while other duties are overemphasized. For instance, the duty to respect others' free speech has become considerably visible due to its association with the right to freedom of expression. This has implications for the ethics of digital communication: O'Neill concludes that excessive preoccupation with rights overshadows other ethical and epistemic duties we have as participants of digital communication (67–68). For instance, duties to ensure truthfulness and civility in online public discourse cannot be easily translated into the framework of individual rights.

In Chapters 3 and 7, O'Neill further develops the core idea of the book. She shows that the tension between accessibility and assessability is nothing new, and stems from past technological innovations as well. Citing Plato on Socrates' warning about how writing as a technology disrupted the assessability of communication, O'Neill draws an analogy between the past and present (34). The main assessability problem with writing is "written words are readily separated both from their authors and from the contexts in which they were produced, making it harder for recipients to understand and assess them" (35). Similarly, printing expanded connectivity by making it much easier to spread messages while limiting recipients' ability to assess the provenance of a speech act (37). In the absence of regulations and norms that ensure the authenticity of authors, there is a major accountability problem: if recipients do not know who the originators are, for instance, when a fake text is disseminated under the name of a respected author, they cannot hold these originators to account for their speech acts (38).

This analysis brings O'Neill to the defense of her position within contemporary policy debates in Chapter 7. O'Neill favors an approach that focuses on "some of the underlying sources of ethical problems" (94–96). For her, the primary issue in digital communication seems to be the lack of accountability resulting from anonymity on online platforms: "problems cannot be addressed unless those responsible for them can be identified" (97). Here O'Neill talks about the anonymity of "those with power to control or fund digital communication" rather than journalists or whistleblowers who speak truth to power in authoritarian regimes. For instance, her critique primarily targets the anonymity of politicians and corporations that purchase micro-targeted ads in order to expand their sphere of influence. O'Neill contends that removing anonymity from the customers of such problematic services is the necessary first step to reforming digital communication (114). Without limiting anonymity and identifying responsible actors, she contends that it will not be possible to initiate a process in which the malicious uses of digital communication can be challenged and responsible parties are held to account.

There is much to like about this book. It is a timely intervention that invites the reader to rethink certain dominant ethical categories that we typically apply to digital communication. O'Neill's diagnosis of the tension between accessibility and assessability also offers an elegant framework to think about the normative tradeoffs within digital communication. However, I believe her main argument has some limitations. One difficulty is that it is not entirely clear why limiting anonymity is the first necessary step to reforming digital communication. The actors responsible for the provision of problematic services such as micro-targeting are already known: a small number of quasi-monopolistic Big Tech corporations. It is true that customers' anonymity exacerbates the situation. However, O'Neill seems to overstate the importance of such anonymity at the cost of shifting attention away from Big Tech corporations, who are already identified as the responsible actors. These corporations' business model and arbitrary power seem to generate the relevant services that other powerful actors utilize on the demand side. O'Neill's diagnosis of the central problem in digital communication is far from pointing out the root cause of our grievances: Big Tech corporations' private, arbitrary, and centralized control over the digital public sphere.

Second, it seems to me that O'Neill's critique of anonymity might not be sufficiently sensitive to the true range of cases where it has positive value. While she acknowledges the value of anonymity in the cases of oppressive states, investigative journalists, and whistleblowers, this still constitutes a very narrow range of acceptable uses of anonymity. Online anonymity can arguably be valuable for marginalized groups, even within liberal democratic societies. One example is queer and feminist individuals' reliance on anonymity in order to shield themselves from the hostility of dominant cultural norms. This is hardly an issue that is limited to authoritarian states (Lingel 2021). Similarly, capitalist workplaces often overstep their boundaries, and employers can arbitrarily interfere with their employees' lives, including their political views and personal matters (Anderson 2017). Given that digital communication technologies such as social media blur the line between individuals' public and private lives, as well as their professional persona and who they are during off-hours, limiting anonymity as a norm with few exceptions might curb a much broader group's ability to express themselves without the fear of retaliation. It is therefore important to question whether limiting anonymity should be understood as an exception in the case of powerful actors, rather than as a generalized norm.

Despite these limitations, I believe this book is an important and original contribution to the ethics of digital communication. It is definitely worth reading, especially for those working on the ethics of technology and the digital public sphere.

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