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The Internet as a moral space: the legacy of Roger Silverstone

Shani Orgad

On 16 June 2006, exactly a month before Roger Silverstone's shocking death, we had our annual [Media@LSE](#) "Away Day": an occasion in which members of the Department of Media and Communications at the LSE talk to one another about current and future research interests, sharing their passions, concerns, anxieties and hopes. We went to the historic and beautiful Cumberland Lodge, set in the heart of Windsor Great Park – a stark contrast to the setting of our London offices. There, on a perfect English sunny summer day, ensconced in the greenery of the Park, Roger talked about the issues that occupied his thinking in the last couple of years, which he had developed most profoundly in his last book, *Media and Morality* (2006). He spoke about the moral significance of the media as the primary framework for people's understanding of the world. He described his conception of the 'mediapolis', which draws on Hanna Arendt's thinking, to describe contemporary media as a global space of appearance. For him, the notion of 'mediapolis' underlined the moral role of the media, in providing, in his words, "a shareable support for difference". On that now very special and memorable day, Roger described the projects he planned to undertake in the future, all part of what he saw as a broader critical project of establishing the primacy of the ethical in social life and, in particular, of the thinking around how the media might be seen to enable or disable, facilitate or deny, moral life.

I want to focus in this piece on what I see as some of the implications of Roger Silverstone's work on media and morality for the study of new media and the Internet in particular. This account does not come close to doing justice to his rich and complex work, which extends far beyond the study of new media and the Internet, and even beyond the study of the media. However, as a scholar who was deeply interested in, and fascinated by, the promises and challenges of the Internet since its early days, and, indicatively, as one of the founders of this journal, Roger Silverstone left a very substantial legacy for researchers in the field. I draw particularly on his book *Media and Morality* (2006), and an earlier (Silverstone, 2003) piece in which he developed the concept of 'proper distance' and proposed some preliminary implications for the

development of an ethics of cyberspace. I also draw informally on many precious hours of discussions I was fortunate to have with Roger, first in his capacity as my PhD supervisor and later as a colleague and mentor, on the role of the Internet and the media in people's everyday lives.

The Internet as an inseparable part of the media environment

Since his early work on television Roger Silverstone has emphasised the media as a crucial constituent of everyday life. He always insisted that the media are not, and therefore should not be seen as, an appendage to the social, political, economic and cultural processes, but that rather they are fundamentally inscribed into these processes. He developed this argument most radically perhaps, in his last book in calling for an environmental approach to the media: "Like the natural environment, the media environment provides both the wherewithal, the resources, for the conduct of social life as well as the grounds of its very possibility" (Silverstone, 2006: 166).

What might this suggest for our understanding of the Internet? The media environment constitutes a space that is increasingly mutually referential and reinforcing, and increasingly integrated into the fabric of everyday life. The Internet is an integral part of this environment. It has multiple connections and interconnections with other media, technologies, and social, cultural, political and economic processes. It, therefore, must be understood and studied as such: not as separate from, but as fundamentally intertwined with the broader media environment it simultaneously shapes and is shaped by.

This points to the significance not only of studying the online as inseparable from the offline, but also vice versa: discussions of contemporary social, cultural, economic, and political processes must take into account the role the media (the Internet being a part of them) play in these processes. This also implies that study of the Internet must consider its relations and interrelation with other media, and explore the Internet and computer mediated communication (CMC) as part of the broader mediation process that has become fundamental to the conduct of our lives.

Of course, the growing trend towards technology convergence and transformation of the media environment into an increasingly mutually referential and interconnected

space makes it impossible empirically to treat the Internet in isolation. However, Silverstone's proposal for a model of media as environmental goes beyond a mere attempt to adequately describe the reality of contemporary global media space. Underlying his proposal for thinking about the media as environment is a concern with the moral consequences of this space: as is the case with the natural environment, the resources provided by the media environment can be used, misused and refused, distorted and enhanced (2006: 167). The ways in which these resources are used can pollute the media environment or contribute to its health.

The Internet is one of the resources that constitute this environment and the way it is used by different actors can have detrimental or beneficial consequences for the environment it is a part of. At the same time, the Internet is affected by, and depends on, the way that the other resources are used. Silverstone's work urges researchers to focus on these concerns in studying the Internet, to look "for a way forward in dealing with the palpable pollution and erosion of the global media environment." (2006: 176-177). This opens up an agenda concerned with the possibilities of establishing the Internet as a moral space. The following section explores some aspects of what such a commitment might entail.

The possibilities of establishing the Internet as a moral space

It is impossible to do justice here to the complexity of Roger Silverstone's account of morality and ethics. I therefore want to focus mainly on his concept of 'proper distance' and to explore some of its implications for the study of the Internet and morality. Silverstone himself addressed some of these implications in his (2003) discussion of 'Proper distance: towards an ethics for cyberspace'.¹ I draw on this discussion and suggest some directions for further development of the debate on the Internet and morality.

Proper distance and responsibility

At the core of Silverstone's account of the media and morality is the nature of our mediated relationship with the other (2006: 6):

Insofar as they [the media] provide the symbolic connection and disconnection that we have to the other, the other who is the distant other, distant

geographically, historically, sociologically, then the media are becoming the crucial environments in which a morality appropriate to the increasingly interrelated but still horrendously divided and conflictual world might be found, and indeed expected. (2006: 8)

Influenced by Bauman's notion of moral proximity, and Levinas's thinking about the other, Silverstone developed 'proper distance' to advocate media ethics that recasts the other as the crucial character in the process of communication.

Proper distance refers to the importance of understanding the more or less precise degree of proximity required in our mediated interrelationships if we are to create and sustain a sense of the other sufficient not just for reciprocity but for a duty of care, obligation and responsibility, as well as understanding. Proper distance preserves the other through difference as well as through shared identity. (2006: 47)

Silverstone suggested using 'proper distance' as a tool to measure and to repair our failures in our communication with the other and in our reporting of the world. The possibility of creating and sustaining a 'proper distance', which is fundamental to the conduct of moral life, he argued, can only be grounded in the asymmetry of social relations; it cannot be based on the expectation that my action will in some way require you to do the same for me. Rather, it should be based on unconditional responsibility. This ethics of 'unconditionality' stresses that responsibility and the duty to care for the other cannot depend on reciprocity. "The capacity, indeed the expectation, of welcoming the other in one's space, with or without any expectation of reciprocity, is a particular and irreducible component of what it means to be human" (2006: 139).

This, of course, throws a critical light on much of the discussion on the Internet and CMC, which has been largely preoccupied with notions such as reciprocity, connections, exchange and interactivity, but, Silverstone (2003) argues, has barely considered the moral status of the communications that are generated online. He acknowledged that there has been some attempt to address the moral status of those who communicate with each other online, particularly in the work that looked at

gender disguise and cross-dressing. However, he criticized the lack of attention to the ethical status of the kind of communications that are generated online: their ability to sustain responsibility and become a truly hospitable space, that is, a space which not only lets the other speak, but is underpinned by the requirement that the stranger should be heard (2006: 139).

In light of this critique, in what follows I want to review some of the central discourses and concepts that frame how the Internet and CMC have been understood and studied. Drawing on Silverstone, my aim is to question the moral implications of these concepts. The discussion here merely scratches the surface of what is, I believe, a complex debate that remains to be seriously developed by and discussed among researchers in the field of new media and the Internet.

Connectivity, sociability, networking and interactivity

The concepts of sociability, interactivity, connectivity, and analyses of networks and strength of social ties have been particularly central in the study of online communication. They have usefully been applied to explain the characteristics of new forms of sociability that are generated in cyberspace, and how they may enhance, reinforce, challenge, complement, substitute or compensate for, other kinds and forms of mediated and face-to-face sociability. What these discussions often failed to question, Silverstone (2003) argues, is the moral status of the kind of communications that are generated online. Do these interactive spaces sustain responsibility in our dealings with mediated others? What are the consequences of features such as interactivity, weak and strong ties, and networking for the inclusion and exclusion of voices and experiences, and for the development of a sense of unconditional responsibility for mediated others behind the screen? These kinds of questions, Silverstone suggested, have been fundamentally overlooked in the study of the Internet. Thus, he urged, “we need to go beyond connection, if we are to pursue a grounded ethics” (2003: 17). Analyses of the Internet have often mistaken connection for closeness, and closeness for commitment, but “closeness, even intimacy, does not guarantee recognition or responsibility”(2003: 8).

Reciprocity and exchange

Closely interlinked to interactivity is the notion of reciprocity and exchange. A central theme in many analyses of Internet phenomena (including my own, focusing on breast cancer patients' online communication)² is that CMC is implicitly based on the expectation of reciprocity. While most studies dealing with this aspect demonstrate how this expectation shapes online communication and is managed by participants, Silverstone urges researchers to consider very seriously its moral implications. Can a communicative space, which is fundamentally, if not exclusively, based on reciprocal relationships, be welcoming to those who may not be able to engage in exchange? Can it foster responsibility to the distant other, if she does not return in kind what has been given to her?

For example, in my study of the online communication among breast cancer patients, I found that the support women offered each other and the sense of care and responsibility that developed in patients' online spaces depended in large part on an implicit ethics of reciprocity. Participants contributing to discussions on message boards, or engaging in other forms of online communication, clearly expected something in return. As long as reciprocity was maintained, a sense of camaraderie and care was maintained. But what happens when a participant posts a message on a patients' board that differs substantially from what the majority of the participants expect to read? For instance, a posting criticising certain medical treatments and services on a board where the tone of the discussion is predominantly emotional, personal and affective? Interviews I conducted with patients revealed that while the ethics of reciprocity underpinning patients' online communication creates a supportive community of fellow-sufferers, it can act to exclude those who do not subscribe to the unwritten rule of reciprocity. Silverstone notes that the stranger emerges as an individual, but is increasingly vulnerable to exclusion if the voice does not 'fit' or does not match: "exclusion or self-exclusion comes with the click of a mouse or the instant judgements of a web-master" (2006: 128).

Interestingly, in this context, Silverstone noted that whereas the defining discourse of the Internet generically includes hospitality terminology, such as host, homepage, and visitor, it is ironically contradicted in the absence of "a meaningful host, one who

takes responsibility for the welcome” (2006: 142). He goes on to argue that the Internet generically cannot provide the proper location for the hospitality the media space should provide, and that it is likely, perhaps even more than the established broadcast media channels, “to reject the unbidden visitor as unwelcome” (2006: 142). While this may be a rather radical claim (and Silverstone himself seems to challenge it throughout the book)³ the important point is the need to consider the moral implications of aspects such as reciprocity and interactivity, and the arguments we make about them.

Anonymity, disembodiment and online intimacy

The question of the disembodied and anonymous character of CMC and its consequences, has been discussed extensively, although consideration of its moral implications has been rather limited. Levinas’s notion of ‘face’ inspired Silverstone to interrogate the moral consequences of the mediated face in broadcast (disseminative) and conversational (dialogic) modes of communication, and specifically in CMC. “The mediated face makes no demands on us, because we have the power to switch off, and to withdraw. But for us as moral beings this is something we can not do.” (2003: 15). The ability to switch on and off in online communication has often been discussed as a social practice in CMC (e.g. Baym, 2000; Orgad, 2005⁴), but its moral consequences have received little consideration. In moral terms, Silverstone argues, the ability to switch off is a consequence of the problem of the distance of the mediated face: “distance threatens responsibility” (2003: 15), it erodes the moral duty of listeners to offer unconditional care. Thus, Silverstone argues, we need to recognise the limits of disembodied experiences. The broadly conversational character of CMC would not necessarily be more conducive than that of broadcast media in the creation of moral life. The closeness and intimacy generated online that would, as many studies have shown, often be impossible face-to-face, should not be confused with responsibility. This is not to say that online interactions cannot and do not cultivate moral dispositions of care and responsibility; nor is it to suggest that physical presence guarantees responsibility and care for the other. The argument here is that the capacity of online communication to create and sustain responsibility and care cannot be simply inferred from the ability to overcome physical distance and develop intimacy and closeness in disembodied environments; its success or failure to create this morality should be critically interrogated.

Identity and Community

The dominant couplet for the analysis of life online, Silverstone (2003) contended, is identity and community. These two concepts frame a very rich and critical body of work on the new forms of connectivity and sociability in the various kinds of communication that are generated online. However, Silverstone (2003) argues, these analyses are often grounded in a narcissistic notion deriving from the self. Even when these accounts of the Internet considered the creation of communities and identities online as embedded within and interdependent with offline contexts, they often failed to recognise that these social realities “are defined according to a functional and solipsistic rationality that believes in the self before, and independent of, the other” (2003: 20). Silverstone was particularly critical of notions such as ‘personal community’ and ‘networked individualism’ (Wellman and Gulia, 1999) in this context. In his words: “the idea of the personal community is possibly, perhaps, the ultimate step: an appropriately postmodern narcissistic move in which community becomes conceptually and empirically, and without irony or reflexivity, both a projection and extension of the self” (2003: 20).

Here Silverstone warns of the danger in subscribing to these concepts uncritically and unreflexively, thereby failing to challenge their moral problematic. In analysing and evaluating the online socialites we study we need to move towards a concern with the other rather than the self. We need to question how these online socialites can create and sustain responsibility.

Towards a different kind of ethics for the Internet

Roger Silverstone handed researchers a critical proposal for a different kind of ethics to those that to date have governed the field. This proposal focuses on the problem of how we can behave responsibly in our dealings with mediated others. While this concern, of course, extends far beyond the Internet, it relates to the field of Internet studies in two significant ways.

The first relates to the relationships of researchers with their participants. How can we behave responsibly and ethically towards the people we study? This issue has been receiving increasing attention, albeit too often from a pragmatic and somewhat

prescriptive approach, particularly with the growing institutionalisation of ethical codes in the social sciences disciplines. While this is by no means to dismiss the importance of developing ethical codes, and codes of practice, it is the more fundamental recognition of the principles underlying these codes of ethics that Silverstone encourages us to critically engage with in our research. ‘Proper distance’ can offer a measure for our relations and dealings with research participants; relationships that should be underpinned by duty of care, responsibility and obligation to the ‘mediated others’ we study.

The second contribution relates to the communications researchers study and to the arguments they propose. Silverstone urges researchers studying the Internet to critically consider the moral implications of their arguments. That is, to interrogate the phenomena studied and the concepts used to describe them, asking how the Internet might be seen to enable or disable moral life, and examining what conditions would facilitate these possibilities.

This questioning inevitably leads me back to where I started this discussion, that the Internet does not exist in isolation; that it is part of the broader mediated environment. If we are to take seriously a discussion of the ways in which the Internet can contribute to the health of this environment rather to its pollution, we must consider its links to other media and the extent to which CMC enhances or weakens other media, as well as is enhanced or weakened by them. Silverstone went so far as to suggest (what he acknowledged may be over radical and is certainly contentious) that:

on its own, that is without the link to other more inclusive media like television, or radio or the press, the internet is a private, exclusive and fragmenting medium: centrifugal rather than centripetal. And it follows that to count on it being the harbinger of a new kind of global political culture, by itself, is a mistake. The internet is not yet, and may never be, strictly a plural medium. It is singular: it significantly relies on, and reinforces, identity not plurality. (2006: 52)

Even if we cannot agree with such a radical suggestion, we cannot deny the significance of questioning the Internet’s capacity to facilitate a meaningfully

inclusive space where distant others, not only geographically, but also culturally, politically, sociologically and historically, are heard, honoured and cared for. The important point is to evaluate the Internet and its moral consequences in relation to, and within the context of, other technologies, delivery systems, platforms, discourses, texts, practices, modes of communication and patterns of use.

And thus I will continue to recall that beautiful day in Windsor Park when Roger Silverstone spoke with such amazing passion and conviction about the moral significance of the media. He leaves behind him a rich and substantial legacy for researchers of Internet, media and communication and other fields, as well as media practitioners, policymakers and regulators. But for me, perhaps Roger's greatest legacy and my most vivid memories of him, will be what he engaged in on that summer day and throughout his life: conversation with colleagues and others, both mediated and unmediated, within the UK and across the globe, in academia and beyond. Crucially, he always listened as well as talking to them. It is the media's responsibility, Silverstone maintained, to provide a space that lets the other speak, and in which her voice can be heard (2006: 139). It is our obligation to strive for this space within the media, and in our everyday lives, as researchers, teachers, citizens, and, beyond all, human beings.

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¹ The citations from Silverstone's 2003 piece correspond with the page numbers of its online version available at http://www.infoamerica.org/documentos_pdf/silverstone05.pdf

² See Orgad (2005).

³ For example, in Chapter 6, in the same discussion on hospitality, Silverstone says that "The internet is coming of age, and in its troubled adolescence it is throwing up significant alternatives to established forms of media practice, ones that are beginning to stand on their own terms, and perhaps more significantly to threaten both the authority and integrity of the dominant media institutions and their platforms" (137-138). See also his discussion of the weblog as a hospitable space (138-139).

⁴ In my study, I described patients' ability to 'drop out' of online interactions as releasing them from the kinds of constraints they experienced in other interactions in their lives, especially medical encounters.