

Profiting From The Web: The Ethics Of The New Media Environment

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2011/05/22/profitting-from-the-web-the-ethics-of-the-new-media-environment/

2011-5-22

These are my notes from a talk given to the [Web Science Conference, 'Profiting From the New Web'](#) on Monday May 23rd, 2011 at the Royal Society. You can see the slides [here](#).



Media Is Now Environmental

I want to start by saying that yes, everybody and every Company is now a media company. We all create and consume media.

Media is now environmental.[1]

Every organisation is now a media company: businesses – government – charities – schools – the NHS.

All produce internal communications such as email.

All produce external communications such as website, press releases, video channels etc

But that distinction doesn't hold too well as we now have mixed or networked communications that are simultaneously:

inside/out side or personal/professional communications: Twitter, Facebook, etc

A natural urge is to either try to do everything or conversely, to withdraw – at the very least, to seek to control.

What I want to stress is that everyone has choices. There is nothing obligatory, natural, or inevitable about this new media environment. If it is an eco-system, it is entirely artificial. Think national park rather than jungle.

These choices will ultimately be driven not by the media but by the real goals of that organisations: profit, power, advocacy, charity, entertainment – whatever. But whatever the goals you need to consider the Ethics.

I want to situate the idea of media ethics in three areas:

1. Social
2. Political
3. Editorial

Now for those of you from the marketing department, or for any fellow journalists out there, I should explain that Ethics is not a county to the east of London. Nor, however, do I mean some kind of religious code or altruistic injunction – I am not going to preach.

This is not about Regulation or Corporate Social Responsibility. This is about how you behave as a media organisation and people interact with your media actions. Understand that there is more to networked communications than technology or economic exchange.

Social Ethics

Here's a family:



Media Family

What are they looking at?

What are they doing with it?

Why are they doing it?

These are ethical questions

In the research we have done on the relationship between families and media across Europe[2] it is clear that reality conflicts with the picture painted by mainstream media and technology companies.

Technology does not drive media behaviour on its own.

Social trends are just as important. Longevity – education – family structures – work patterns all create the conditions for media adoption and adaptation.

This is ethical because people are making choices on the basis of what they think is right and wrong for their lives on a moral as well as practical basis.

Because media is personal, our use of it is informed by our attitudes and identity as well as our financial or literacy status.

What do you think of when you hear about a mother texting her daughter to come down to dinner?

Is it good or bad? Do you wonder what else they do with that mobile phone? Why is that girl in the bedroom? Is it because she is on her laptop? Perhaps she is revising for her exams because she is part of the explosion of women outperforming boys and flooding into higher education? Or perhaps she's on some ghastly Justin Bieber fan website.

She is in her bedroom because of all that expensive media technology in her room – probably with iPod playing – TV on in the corner – and FB on in another window – while texting a friend.

Has she got all that gear in her bedroom because her parents don't want her wandering the streets and this is a form of allowing her to be social while at home?

As we live longer, become more educated, invest more in our children, work longer hours, we want different media. So every company is a media company but they must also be a social company. They must understand the personal and community context of their employees and their customers' lives. They must understand the co-evolution of media technology and social trends, but also the correlation between moral and technical choices.

Political Ethics

Every organisation has an ideological outlook that shapes its strategy and behaviour and therefore its communications. It is political because it is the practical negotiation between the organisation's aims and the real world.

And in the new media environment that is exposed to accountability from rival organisations, the news media and the public in general to a degree that is unprecedented.

We are now living in what Klaus Swab of the WEF called a glass room. The fact that WikiLeaks and the rest of the world is online means that you can never be sure that you won't be exposed and when it happens it can be swift and endless, beyond legal sanction even. So as Don Tapscott says, if you are going to be naked then you had better be what I believe the Americans call buff.[and that is about the best chance I will ever have to show a naked person in a presentation]But I want you to think beyond the PR and marketing issues of reputation protection.



Are you really prepared as an organisation for the idea that flows of information about your organisation can be reversed?

Have you really thought through how that openness could be part of the way you work rather than a threat?

At a recent conference the head of a development organisation explained to me why she didn't want her staff to Tweet – she asked how could she be accountable to a tweet if she hadn't signed it off? I asked her what had she to hide in comparison to the potential engagement that communication might bring? She was still holding to one – entirely legitimate form of accountability – vertical – hierarchical – when the new media environment shows she must now embrace a new, horizontal form of accountability.

Our work with development iNGOs has shown that while they profess a policy of devolution, bottom up policy making, etc in media they try to retain control instead of maximising opportunities for more open, shared, distributed engagement with both donors and clients.

So the ethical risk is two-fold. Firstly, if you are not transparent and you act badly, you will get found out and you will look worse because you tried to hide it in a world where the default moral expectation of the citizen is that you will be transparent.

Secondly, if you declare a set of ethics that are not enacted in your media policy, you will also be held to account – in that sense, the medium IS the ethical message.

Editorial Ethics

The third area of ethics is around the rights and responsibilities of being a media company.

Everyone is now mediating news. Look at the Arab Uprisings or look at a football match and see the diversity of sources, commentaries, analysis, reaction, witnessing.

If you want to be trusted – and trust is the way to attention in networked communications- then you have to accept the responsibilities as well as the rights of being a journalist or communicator.

The ethics of this are vastly expanded online – and in effect mainly self-regulating.

So you are expected to tell the truth, to be factual and accurate.

In return you have the right to free expression.

But in the new media the editorial ethics continue:

Here are three examples:

- show your sources – link to them and to other points of view
- allow me to interact or comment
- facilitate media literacy – be intelligible, usable

Do these kinds of things and your communications accepts the ethics of networked communications:

- You earn the right to use people's data but you have the responsibility to protect their privacy
- You earn the right to speak by listening.
- You show the value of what you do by understanding the values of your audience

So I hope that I have shown that social, political and editorial ethics are now part of the information economy, and that we can profit from the new web by becoming part of the positive potential of engagement online.

[You can see the [slideshow of this talk here](#)]

[1] Silverstone, R. 2006 Media and Morality (Polity)

[2] [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/30156/1/family_and_media_report_\(LSERO_version\).pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/30156/1/family_and_media_report_(LSERO_version).pdf)

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science