

Ethics in education

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Jeremy has developed a group of case studies to be used as a teaching and learning resource for middle-school level students. The case studies outline specific ethical scenarios involving the use of information and communication technology (ICT) and promote discussion of the numerous ethical issues involved.

Reflecting on the justification of our actions and their effects on others is an important part of living in a community. However, identifying and reflecting on ethical values can sometimes be a difficult task as there are often conflicting ethical or political values at stake. For example, while some advocate censoring material on the Internet because it offends against community moral standards, others might argue that this disregards the important value of free speech.

A certain amount of conflict about ethics will always occur. But one of the ways to arrive at a better understanding of ethical issues is to be clear about what values are being invoked and how they are justified.

The case studies presented here attempt to clarify and introduce some of the ethical ideas involved in a range of everyday situations. They also provide an example of how philosophers think about conflicts in ethics without necessarily providing answers to the problems discussed.

The aim of developing these case studies is to provide teachers with background information and a guide in order to involve students in the development of critical thinking skills in the area of ethics, especially in the area of ethics and the use of technology. Each case study takes students through a 'virtual' scenario in order to demonstrate the different ethical implications and acceptability or unacceptability of on-line behaviour. Using actual case studies actively involves students in the process of learning and develops their ability to reason about ethical issues, thereby building students' capacity to reflect about responsibility towards oneself and others.

Censorship

Censorship on the Internet is one of the controversial aspects of Internet regulation. Given the vast range of information posted on the web, the global reach of websites, and the ease of access to Internet content, there is frequently a call for some sort of regulation or censorship of the content of various sites. Because of the lack of monitoring of site content, the Internet poses unique difficulties for those who think there should be censorship of certain types of content.

There are different definitions of censorship, but for our purposes we can define it as the restriction of speech or other forms of expression based on its content. The most obvious example of censorship is where a government or one of its authorities restricts say a film or book because of its perceived harm or the offence it might cause. But we also often speak of censorship by non-government bodies such as newspapers. It is important to note that censorship concerns restricting expression, which might include speech,

writing, physical gestures, films, music or art. For instance, controversial works of art about religious topics are sometimes censored because they offend religious sensibilities.

The topic of censorship is very controversial. Of those who support it, there is often disagreement about why it is so important. There are many who regard it with suspicion, linking it to unjustified limitations on freedom of expression. The motivations or justifications for censorship are very important as they establish how censorship is to be understood. One argument for censorship is that expressions should be censored when they flout society's moral standards. For instance, writing or websites with explicit sexual content might be censored on the grounds that prevailing social morality is against them. One difficulty with this argument is that it is sometimes difficult to work out what public morality is. There are, for example, many different views in Australian society about what level of sexual content it is permissible to have in a public setting. Another concern is that even where something does obviously go against public morality it is not clear that this is a good reason to use the law to censor it. Some people appeal to free speech in this context. One reason for not censoring expression is that it is part of an individual's liberty to express themselves in whatever way they choose. A further argument is that it is also important for 'listeners' to be exposed to a variety of different perspectives. Although much expression might be objectionable, having diverse and competing opinions in society is how we arrive at the truth.

Against these arguments, advocates of censorship often claim that it is important to censor certain expressions because of the harm that they do to others. For instance, making false or misleading claims about someone's private life – defamation – is often thought to be an area where speech can be suppressed on the grounds that it is more important to prevent harms being done to someone than to allow unfettered free speech. Another area where censorship is often employed is in the case of 'hate speech'. Hate speech is where speech or other forms of expression are used to insult or defame members of a group identified by their race or ethnicity for instance. Examples of hate speech include white supremacist organizations who vilify non-whites or other social groups such as Jewish people, on the basis of their ethnic or racial characteristics. Hate speech might occur in many arenas, from television, to radio, to the AFL football field. In such cases, many people would accept that it is permissible to restrict freedom of speech.

Censorship and the Internet

We have considered some of the arguments for and against censorship, and how censorship might occur in various forms of media. The Internet differs from other forms of media in a number of important ways. The differences are relevant to how the Internet could be regulated, and to the ethical implications of such regulation.

Like television, the Internet is free to anyone with access to the relevant hardware. This means that the possibility of regulation at the point of sale, as occurs with some movies and magazines, does not exist. A movie containing sexually explicit content may be restricted to individuals over eighteen, but similar content is available on the Internet with no such restrictions. Although television is also free, there are important differences between the Internet and television. While television stations are answerable

to community concerns about the nature of the content that they carry, Internet Service Providers (ISPs) are not accountable in the same way.

Although inequities exist in access to the Internet and the information contained therein (an issue taken up in the case study entitled 'the digital divide'), the accessibility of the Internet has at least the potential to dramatically increase people's access to information. As noted above, this virtually unlimited accessibility means that the Internet is more difficult to regulate than books, movies, and other forms of media. There are also additional issues associated with the way the Internet works. In particular, anyone with basic computer skills can be 'published'. Hence, information presented on the Internet ranges from the credible and well researched, to the poorly researched and outright false. This means that it is up to the user to discriminate among the information accessed. (See the case study 'Information on the Internet' for more discussion of this point.)

There are at least two ways in which Internet content might be regulated. The first is a global form of censorship at the level of government or independent censorship committee, or by ISPs. This form of censorship would attempt to regulate the information *available* on the Internet. While the extent to which regulation at a global level is successful depends on what is technologically possible, it is still worth examining whether this should occur. The second form of censorship would occur at the local level of workplace, school, or family. Local censorship in this form attempts to regulate the information accessed on the Internet. Regulation at a local level already exists in many schools, families and workplaces. Restrictions on what is accessed might be enforced by a software package or might rely on an honour system where use of the Internet is conditional on agreeing to some sort of responsible use policy.

Private v public Internet use/ access

One of the cited things in favour of censorship is that it might protect individuals from the potentially negative effects of harmful materials. Consider the case of pornography. It is easy to imagine many reasons why schools and workplaces prohibit individuals from accessing pornography on the computers they provide. One reason is because to do so is a misuse of resources designated for use in relation to work or studies only. An employer might not permit access of any non-work related site simply because this is time spent unproductively. A more common reason for prohibiting access to pornography at work or at school is because such material is offensive to many. Further, pornography can be perceived as threatening, and the knowledge that a co-worker regularly visits pornographic sites while at work may make many workers very uncomfortable around this person.

Imagine for the moment that we agree that these reasons preventing the access of pornography in a workplace or school are understandable and acceptable. These reasons do not prohibit visiting pornographic sites in the privacy of one's own home, as the alleged harm that such material may cause in the school or workplace is not to ourselves, but to others and the social environment. Most people feel some resistance to the idea that we ought to be protected from certain material simply 'for our own good' and that the government or some classification board should be the authority on what is for our own good and what is not.

The argument that someone's choices about what they access in private should be protected because no one else is affected is not as straightforward as it might seem. Some people argue that consumption of such material can have a potentially dangerous effect on the individual. It could also be argued that every act of consumption is potentially an act that affects someone, and that therefore pornography accessed in one's home still may directly or indirectly affect others. Regularly viewing pornography might, for instance, result in a change of attitude towards women in general. Hence, the 'private' act of accessing the Internet in one's own home may still have public implications.

Case study 1

Hillside Secondary College has a very advanced computer lab and a rather generous computer usage policy. The policy allows students to surf the Internet for school projects and personal reasons outside school hours. Samuel often makes use of this resource because he does not have Internet access at home. Samuel is completing a project on the scientific breakthroughs associated with war. His searches on the Internet revolve around weapons, making bombs and their effects. He finds a great number of sites with information on these topics. The sites have not been censored by the ISP but are censored at the level of his school. Samuel is asked to explain his searches and hauled before the principal.

Questions

- 1 Should sites detailing historical facts be exempt from censorship even if they contain information that may be put to misuse? For example, is detailing how bombs have been made in the past the same as providing instructions on making a bomb today?
- 2 If we agree with some kind of censorship, is it enough to censor sites that contain key words, for example violent or racist language, or should sites be considered in their entirety?
- 3 Samuel feels his right to freedom of information has been violated. He could have found the information in a book but was trying to be more efficient. Do you think he has a point?
- 4 Would it make a difference if Samuel was a Year 7 or a Year 12 student?
- 5 What criteria ought to be used to censor or restrict Internet content?
- 6 How do we distinguish between sexually explicit material and pornography?
- 7 If we agree that some Internet content should be censored, whose responsibility is it to judge what is acceptable content and what is not?

Case study 2

A search engine that is commonly used by students claims that it filters the results of all searches to prevent inappropriate results. For example, if Jason was searching for information about musicians certain sites would not be listed if they contained 'inappropriate' information, even if they also contained some accurate and value neutral information. Jason uses the information he has gathered and completes an assignment that required him to evaluate the lives of musicians compared with other professions. His

assignment concludes that musicians are very good role models and that they can have very positive influences. While this may be true, it is not the whole picture.

Questions

- 1 Has Jason obtained an accurate view of the situation?
- 2 Does the use of censorship restrict Jason's ability to make his own accurate evaluation of rock stars? Would it be better for him to have all the information, even about topics he may be too young to understand fully and then try to form his own opinion?
- 3 Could censorship of this kind restrict learning? Should this type of censorship change incrementally with age?
- 4 If censorship can sway opinion at this level how powerful might Internet censorship be if governments could control it?

Case study 3

Alex is a 21 year old and works in an office. His workplace prohibits accessing pornographic websites in the office, as most workplaces do. Alex accepts these restrictions and complies with the Internet use policy of his workplace. However, when he is at home, Alex frequently visits Internet sites that feature hardcore violent pornography. Alex learns that there is a government plan to prevent the availability of such material on the Internet. Alex feels that such a restriction is unfair; he is not hurting anyone by accessing this material, and he does not share the material with anyone else. He thinks the government should not be allowed to decide on what material he is able to access and enjoy in the privacy of his own home.

Questions

- 1 What are the differences between accessing material in private and accessing it in public?
- 2 What are the possible reasons why the Government might think it is appropriate to censor violent pornography? These reasons might be to do with both the production of such material, and the effect it has on those who access it.
- 3 Can there truly be a private act of consumption, or do all acts of consumption have effects beyond the individual? Consider, for example, whether Alex's repeated exposure to pornographic images has an effect on Alex's own relations with women. Even if it does not, is this a risk of allowing access to such material? If it is, does this justify its regulation? This debate is quite familiar. After the Columbine shootings it was found that the teenage shooters had modeled their attack on a scene from *The Basketball Diaries*. This led to much media discussion about whether films like this are in some way responsible for violence enacted by those who watch the films. Is this a good analysis? Why? Why not?
- 4 Alex is 21. Would it make a difference if he were younger, say 17? Or 13? Why do we often think that some material is suitable for those over a certain age, but not for children or young adults?
- 5 Should email content be censored or restricted in the same way as Internet content? How does email differ from regular mail, if it does at all?

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