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Published in:
Trefoil. The Southern African Catholic Quarterly

Publication date:
2001

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Jans, J. M. N. E. (2001). A bicycle brake on a jumbo jet? Some cornerstones for internetics. *Trefoil. The Southern African Catholic Quarterly*, 67(264), 44-45.

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Some cornerstones for 'Internethics'



A bicycle brake on a jumbo jet?

Dr. Jan Jans

“Bicycle brakes on a jumbo jet?” Is this a suitable image for gaining insight into the relationship between the internet and ethics? According to Swiss media-ethicist Matthias Loretan, from whom I have borrowed this image, it suggests two things: that the internet is big, strong and fast, and that ethics – on the payroll as a constant brake – will scarcely make any impression.

ACCORDING TO me, such an assessment might be correct, at least if one shares that vision of ethics. However, in an alternative position that I'd like to present, ethics isn't this kind of external impediment. I would suggest envisioning ethics as the bringing together of factual knowledge about an issue with the consciousness that all of our human actions involve an entwining of advantages and disadvantages, of values and disvalues. The aim of ethics is to develop this consciousness in such a

way that we are able to deal with the issue at stake. In other words, and applied to the internet: ethics aims at providing people with the 'tools' needed to assume responsibility with regard to what is going on in cyberspace and is not just about being confronted with or avoiding value-questions.

A suitable cluster of notions, which at the same time demonstrates that ethics is really at the heart of the internet itself, is this foursome: access,

privacy, property and accuracy. With the exception of the first, the order is of minor importance; concrete questions will derive mostly from a combination of these issues. In discussing them, I hope to provide some of the tools previously mentioned.

ACCESS

IT all begins (or immediately ends!) with having or not having access to the internet. There is a steady increase in users: about 61 million in 1996, 320 million in 2000 and an estimated 700 million at the end of 2001. This raises the question of 'the digital divide': the gap between connected cybernauts and digital illiterates who remain without access. The vital issue here is not so much technical (although this element is not without importance) but socio-political. The tussle is between the importance of information and communication in society and the political willingness to unlock this unique mode of access, the internet, to everyone. An obstacle for the realisation of such a political programme might be commercial interests, for the generosity of companies providing schools and libraries with hard- and software almost free of charge, is ambiguous. This market ploy places these companies and their products in the limelight, and the internet itself only to a lesser degree.

HOWEVER, once access is available, it becomes clear that almost 'everything' is available on the internet. Next to the risk of simply drowning in endless data, most attention is devoted to illegal and harmful material. In this context, it is

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of interest that in the European Commission's global *Action Plan* on the safe use of the internet, the emphasis is on 'preventing misuse', with little money or research spent on 'promoting best use'.

This is understandable in view of the unease that parents and educators in general experience as a result of the easy access to, for example, the pornography or racism that is readily available. However, the usually-proposed remedy of deploying filter-software or of imposing control by internet providers is only part of the

answer. The real – quite difficult – solution seems to be to become acquainted with the internet as a mirror of ‘the real world’, in which evil does not disappear by keeping it from one’s doorstep. In other words: yes, the internet is indeed a place with lots of indecent stuff, but the up- and downloading is done by humans and, therefore, there is no substitute for cyber pedagogy.

PRIVACY

A SECOND side effect of the internet’s open structure concerns the protection of privacy. A mass of personal information is stored in databases (insurance, medical aid, banks, employer, telephone, supermarkets, etc). And the internet seems to invite the connection of this data in some way. The result is described as a ‘digital portrait’ or a ‘digital fingerprint’. Even those who self-assuredly claim that they have nothing to hide might not be pleased that their health insurance company knows their supermarket, pharmacy or restaurant buying patterns. Furthermore, users have to realise that the sometimes-praised anonymity on the internet is largely an illusion because the very possibility of surfing the worldwide web results precisely in my computer’s IP-address being known and stored so that the information behind any hyperlink can be effectively transported to me.

The many intermediate computers, necessary to bring an e-mail from sender to recipient, provide as many opportunities for the confidentiality of the mail to be violated. The often-proposed answer, the use of encryption (coding data only decipherable by the sender and the recipient) is often objected to because such e-communication could be misused by criminal organisations. It seems that some government intervention is called for here, but it will remain difficult to keep the balance: freedom of speech and communication is one issue, regulation to protect the privacy of internet users another. The internet seems to be a noteworthy area where these two values conflict.

RECOMMENDED READING: *Cybernavts Awake!* Ethical and Spiritual Implications of Computers, Information Technology and the Internet, London: Church House Publishing 1999, 94pp; <http://www.starcourse.org/sciteb2/starcourse/cyber/>

PROPERTY

IN THE third place, the internet has a commercial side not only through the increase in sales of computers and network connections. In these areas, classical property rights apply without difficulty because we are dealing with visible, material goods. The situation is quite different with regard to digital data. Since the outset of the success of personal computers (word processors, spreadsheet crunchers and/or game consoles), many users have been ‘broadminded’ with respect to the copyright of software. To copy a diskette was hardly perceived as theft; protection measures were easily bypassed – often with illegally copied software.

THE success of cyberspace and the hype about ‘virtual’ reality increased this blurring of a sense of property. The fact that the most commonly used internet browsers and their plug-ins are ‘given away free’ by their producers when buying a computer, through CD-Roms attached to magazines or on the internet itself, only increases this opacity. On the one hand, users are paying, anyway, through the imposition of advertisements. On the other hand, such ‘free for all’ policies extend into a substantial distribution of data that in the ‘real world’ would without doubt be protected by (intellectual or commercial) copyright. An example is the case of MP3, where legally purchased music was offered and distributed through the internet without remuneration for the artist. Another example causing stirrings among teachers is the possibility of getting assignments off the internet, with the risk that they will be used not to assist students to perform their tasks, but will be submitted – with minor changes – as original work. This type of fraud is made easier by the internet and the answer, in my opinion, is once again to be sought in the corner of cyber pedagogy.

“The praised anonymity on the internet is largely an illusion”

This article, above, is adapted from my article “*Ethische fietsrem op jumbo-internet. Grenzen aan cyber-vrijheid?*”, in *Tertio – christelijk opinieblad voor het derde millennium*, vol.1, 48 (10/1/2001) p.7.

ACCURACY

NOW for the fourth element of ‘Internethics’. By its apparent technological victory over the limits of time and space, the internet seems to radiate real plausibility (the infamous reduction of the message to the medium). Just as once radio and television managed to ‘re-present’ their own reality to their customers, now today the internet appears to promise to keep its users always ‘up-to-date’. But such enthusiasm for on-line journalism too easily closes its eyes to the risks inherent in such a stream of information that floats on the velocity of supply and demand. These risks are enhanced when

providers try to get ‘scoops’. A sobering example of the resulting confusion and dis-information is what happened after the recent US presidential elections, when user-demand and the supply of providers stumbled over one another because the

stream of ‘data’ continued to flow.

ACCURACY, with respect to privacy and property, is also at stake in the so-called ‘new economy’ or e-commerce. Sellers exhaust themselves convincing potential customers that the acquisition of goods or services and payment through credit cards can be trusted. The suppleness with which mistakes and abuses are dealt with is really remarkable, because the sector knows that, without building up trust, there will be no future.

As a daily user, I have come to appreciate the internet’s open access to information and its power in the field of communication. To maintain and to develop this unique combination of ‘user’ and ‘participant’, I hope that ethical reflection, which also pays attention to the new grey areas and shadow sides, can keep pace with technology, inspired by the insight that, after all, it is human beings who are at the beginning and at the end of the internet.

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