
The Internet, sprawling and seemingly lawless, has often been compared to the Wild West, an analogy that no doubt depends more on Hollywood than history. Still, many an ethicist might be tempted to call in the cavalry of regulation to tame the excesses of the unscrupulous speculators and rescue the hapless victims of our new digital culture. Thankfully, Ess, Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Drury University and former chair of the Association of Internet Researchers is not one of them. Instead, he gives us a thoughtful primer for exploring the ethical terrain of what he calls “the new mediascape.”

Notably, unlike many other media ethics books, this one is addressed to users rather than media professionals or philosophers. It can be read by anyone interested in the issues but it is chiefly designed as a textbook for students complete with case studies and prompts for discussion and journal writing no doubt developed from some of the courses Ess has offered at Drury University. It would serve well as a teaching text for courses in communication ethics, media ethics, or even as a supplementary text in an introductory ethics course. Students learning to parse the differences between consequentialist and non-consequentialist arguments will get plenty of exercise as they consider the Facebook user agreement (that most of them will have agreed to already), digital rights management, and the Danish Muhammad cartoon imbroglio. They will also encounter the feminist debate over the “pornification of society” and the differences between American and European understandings of copyright. Ess states that own sympathies lie with the virtue ethics tradition, which may be especially appropriate to the everything’s-accessible nature of the Internet. For example, there is a useful discussion of the virtue of “epistemological humility” (112) while engaging in cross-
cultural electronic communications. There is also a virtue ethic critique of playing violent video games (158-160). Yet given Ess’ statement about his attraction to this form of thinking, the reader might expect more would be said about this tradition’s potential insight into illegal downloading, blogging, and social networking, or about the cultivation of other specific virtues that are relevant to the digital age. This might provoke further inquiry into whether the virtues required for the digital age are substantially different than those valued in previous times and cultures. Does email and twitting, for instance, require a new form of human social wisdom? Do virtual encounters with other cultures necessitate a different kind of humility than “real” encounters?

It is precisely because of the global characteristic of the digital media revolution that this book is especially commendable for its discussions of non-Western and non-individualist perspectives, particularly Confucian virtue and African-Ubuntu ethics. There is sensitivity throughout to cultural difference and how context matters in forming moral thinkers. Here is where the book might have gained most from an awareness of recent trends in moral psychology. For example, discussion of proposed lists of universal moral values and virtues (Schwartz and Seligman respectively), or Haidt’s theory of the differences between individualist and collectivist areas of moral judgments would have considerably sharpened Ess’ analysis.

The many virtues of this book are hindered by its fussy and idiosyncratic organization. The six chapters (Introduction, four chapters of applied ethics, and a final general introduction to ethics) each typically begin with an epigraph, a chapter overview, a brief introduction, and an extended case study with discussion questions…all before we get to the main text. Then come further reflection questions and cases, some of which contain such extended discussions that would have been better included in the central chapter material. Similarly confusing, near the end of the first chapter we get advice on how to approach the book after which time the reader is already well into her or his reading strategy. A final chapter introduces “basic ethical frameworks” which to those new to the field seems awkwardly placed since much of the earlier chapters depend on this material and since this final chapter itself contains few explicit applications to digital media.

Other potential simplifications seem obvious: Why not divide digital sex and online gaming into two separate chapters? Why wait until the supplemental reflection/discussion section in the third chapter (95-96) to explicitly name the issue of acculturation into individualist/collectivist
societies when this is so central to an argument in the second chapter on privacy rights? Since there is also a synopsis of all of the chapters in the book’s front matter (xix-xxi) do we really also need chapter overviews? Simplifying and rationalizing the book might have extended its appeal beyond the media ethics textbook market. As it stands, reading the book with its elaborate sub-divisions is a bit too much like the disconnected experience one has browsing the Internet with someone else controlling the mouse. That being said, these difficulties may be less problematic when the book is used as it is intended: under the guidance of a teacher in a classroom setting.