



Digital Ethics and Mindful Circulation: Navigating the Complexities in the Digital Age

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Abstract

In the digital age, characterized by unprecedented connectivity and rapid information exchange, the dynamics of writing, communication, and ethical considerations have undergone profound transformations. This paper aims at exploring why the ethical implications of digital communication are important during circulating and disseminating information in the context of digital ethics. The primary texts for this paper are tweets by former President of United States of America, Donald Trump and some other posts on social media. To support the claim, the researchers use a wide range of scholars such as L. Floridi who focuses on digital ethics and L.E. Gries who discusses “circulation” as a central concept in digital rhetoric. This paper also argues that algorithms and big data applications should prioritize improving human well-being, dignity, rights, and autonomy. For that, the researchers have used Gilli A. et al.’s concept of “human-centered” writing, M.C. Murphy’s insights about the role of social media algorithms, and B. McComiskey’s concept of “post-truth.” This paper concludes that digital technologies and algorithms should shape the ethical landscape of information dissemination thereby emphasizing the importance of ethical frameworks in navigating the complexities of digital communication to safeguard societal values, truthfulness, and democratic discourse amidst the challenges posed by misinformation and capitalist influences.

Keywords: Algorithm, circulation, digital ethics, digital writing human-centered, post-truth

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Introduction

The digital age has revolutionized the way we interact with others and disseminate information. Writing and content circulation dynamics have undergone profound transformations in this era of unparalleled connectivity and rapid information exchange. However along with the positive transformations, the ethical implications and mindful dissemination of information have been a serious issue. Certain politicians, motivated by their political agendas and financial interests, spread their stories without regard for validity. Despite the lack of credibility, their stories continue to spread, and some people are influenced by them, leading to actions that can even result in violence. So, this paper seeks to solve the question: what is the importance of the ethical implication in circulating and disseminating information? For that purpose, the paper focuses on the tweets of Donald Trump and others as the primary texts. For the theoretical insights, it uses the concepts of different scholars such as Luciano Floridi, L.E. Gries, M.C. Murphy, and B. McComiskey. Finally, the paper concludes that mindfulness and ethical considerations are crucial in the digital landscape while circulating and disseminating the content of digital information.

To understand digital ethics, we must understand what is considered digital. As Pawlett (2007) has highlighted, analog technologies rely on similarity, proportion, and resemblance principles. In contrast, digital technologies function through coded distinctions rather than proportion or similarity. The term “digital” is commonly associated with computer technologies. However, it is essential to recognize that any system

composed of discrete elements conforms to the technical definition of digital systems, and these digital systems encompass writing, Braille and Morse code. In the modern world, digital space has become a liberal platform in the sense that everyone can be the author of their content. The world has become digital as it allows for low-cost reproduction of large amounts of content, as well as its manipulation and redistribution with ease; this material can be stored with perfect fidelity, and it can be reused (in original or altered form) repeatedly at little or no cost (Chen, 2013). However, we must find a way to share everything we want, overlooking the ethical concerns. Intelligent machines are taking over in all fields to gather and process data.

Digital ethics examines and assesses moral dilemmas associated with data, algorithms, and related practices. These include various activities, such as data handling, algorithmic decision-making, and ethical programming (L. Floridi, 2021). It examines the moral issues related to data, the rules that computers follow, and how we program them. This includes studying how we circulate data, make decisions, and ensure that our digital writing is done ethically. Circulation has become a central and essential concept in digital rhetorics, indicating its significance in understanding how information and meaning disseminate and transform in digital communication environments.

The term “circulation” conveys the notions of rapidity, continuous movement, and dynamic progression in the context of processes related to transmitting and transforming cultural, rhetorical, and affective elements (Gries,

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2018). We use AI in many things directly or indirectly, and they solve our problems to some extent, too, but they are not given the agency to determine whether the choices they make are right or wrong. In order to understand AI and to make these digital spaces as ethical as possible, we should consider the purpose behind its creation, its operating techniques, what guidelines it follows, and to what extent. The programming of AI is “human-centered, i.e., based on fundamental human rights and thus algorithms, big data, and their applications should be designed for improving human beings’ living conditions, including dignity and rights, freedom, autonomy, their purpose in life as well as the natural environment surrounding them” (Gilli A., et.al, pp. 48-49).

In simple terms, being “human-centered” means that when we create algorithms, work with big data, and develop applications, we should prioritize people’s well-being and fundamental rights. This includes ensuring that these technologies are used to improve people’s lives, respect their dignity and rights, enhance their freedom and ability to make choices, help them find meaning and purpose in life, and protect the natural environment surrounding them. In other words, it is about using technology to improve the world for individuals and society.

Literature Review

This paper is a qualitative analysis of the ethical and mindful circulation of digital information. It has focused on the tweets of former American President Donald Trump and other posts on social media which are analyzed from the perspective of ethics and digital circulation. It analyzes how politicians, like Trump,

disseminate false stories just for the promotion of their political agendas and financial interests, and consequently influence the public, who outright come out for action which can erupt even into violence. This has been a serious issue in the current political landscape, and requires in-depth studies, which are lacking till the date.

McComiskey (2017) has analyzed Donald Trump’s speeches and rhetorical strategies during his presidential election and campaigns 2016. According to him, Trump seemed to be persuasive despite being unethical. He focused on his authoritative personality and emotional appeal to get votes during the election. McComiskey states, “Trump did not win this election in the usual way, with an occasional negative ad, but in general using sincere argumentation and ethical persuasion to demonstrate that he has the most relevant experience and the best plan to move the country forward” (p. 3). He showed the shift in how influential people use unethical rhetoric to accomplish their goals and how the public audiences consume and disseminate post-truth stories to the broader audience with often fabricated context without fact-checking. McComiskey talks about the model of “Fake news” of Trump which is mainly fueled by ethos and pathos rather than logos. McComiskey argues, “Politicians are using the persuasive capability to achieve their vested interest unethically, for which they use fake news, metaphors, vague social media posts, policy reversals, and name-calling” (p. 3).

The book edited by Boczkowski and Papacharissi (2018) deals with how Trump manipulated media to come to the chair of president in 2016. It

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incorporates many critical essays from different scholars. The book focuses on “a key aspect of how the coming to power of Donald Trump intersects with the dynamics of information production, distribution, and reception in the news and/or social media” (p. 2). But the ethical aspect has been left out.

Research Methods

Primarily, this is qualitative research that focuses on the impacts of the tweets of former American President Donald Trump and other posts on social media which are analyzed from the perspective of ethics and digital circulation. As library-based research, this paper draws theoretic insights related to digital ethics (Luciano Floridi), circulation (L.E. Gries), social media algorithms (M.C. Murphy) and post truth (B. McComiskey). The paper highlights the concerning impact of false information on public perception and behavior, and the necessity of ethical considerations.

In a “post-truth” climate even unlikely stories have become popular in the United States. The webpage of *The Oxford Dictionary* defines post-truth as an adjective that describes situations in which objective facts have a diminished influence on shaping public opinion compared to appeals to emotion and personal belief. In such situations, the impact of emotional persuasion and individual convictions outweighs the significance of verifiable facts in shaping collective viewpoints (McComiskey, 2017, p. 5). Today, “post-truth” means, words are used without connecting to facts or truths. When language does not refer to factual information, it becomes a tool for strategy. In a post-truth communication setting, individuals, especially politicians, use language

according to the exigency, regardless of whether it is accurate or based on facts, to get the desired result (Keyes, 2022). McComiskey highlights that certain politicians, driven by the desire for support and money, irresponsibly spread these tales. However, the incredibility of these claims helps their circulation. Surprisingly, some individuals accept these stories, leading to action, including cases of violence (p. 32). Even improbable stories can gain attention as people do not check facts, believe the misinformation, and often disregard the truth.

Raising awareness about digital ethics and algorithms is also essential as people seek information that aligns with their beliefs, a tendency reinforced by social media algorithms. These algorithms often promote engaging content to users while filtering out opposing viewpoints, which can limit exposure to diverse perspectives (Murphy, 2016). In order to step out of this constraint and stop people from spreading fake news, an awareness of digital ethics is a must.

Along with that, capitalism has the upper hand in circulating fake news and manipulating media deliberately for their vested interest. Fisher (2009) claims that “Capitalism is [a] monstrous, infinitely plastic entity, capable of metabolizing and absorbing anything which it comes into contact with” (p. 6). Capitalist ideologies can become so ingrained in society that it becomes challenging to discern whether capitalist motives drive a specific event or occurrence. In the same way, Marwick and Lewis (2017), in their report have noted, “Manipulators do not care whether the media is discussing a story to debunk it or downplay it; their main goal is to have it in the spotlight. The media attention given to specific

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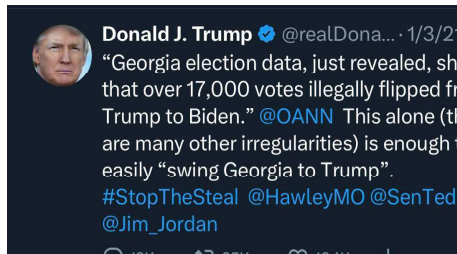
issues shapes how the public perceives their importance” (p. 39). This refers to how strategically spreading specific ideas can create an emotional environment that discourages certain responses. It does not mean that opposition does not matter, but it questions the usefulness of engaging in an emotional atmosphere where opposing voices can be easily ignored.

The repeated sharing of content enhances its significance as it spreads through various networks, allowing it to gain influence and credibility. Brown (2014) emphasized the need to consider how digital spaces shape ethical relationships. On platforms such as Reddit and other social networks, sharing content does not always mean endorsing the content itself; it could be because the content is found amusing, moving, critical, or stimulating.

Results and Discussion

These digital platforms are created to make sharing effortless, ensuring that texts and images can swiftly reach a wider audience. Irrespective of the intention, sharing such content implies a lack of trust in news agencies and journalists, fostering a negative view of the news.

Figure 1:



Tweet by Donald Trump, for president of the United States

The tweet mentioned above, for example, in which Trump is talking about how the votes from Georgia that he was supposed to get were illegally swung to Biden. A total of 104 K people liked the tweet, 12K people commented on it, and 25K people retweeted it. The fact that 25K people have retweeted means these followers believed the news without investigating the issue that Trump has spread on this platform, which is usually misleading. Conversely, the purpose behind sharing the tweet and using it as a reference is to channel people’s aggression towards it, thereby fostering its rapid spread to reach a larger audience cannot be overlooked. However, people who check the facts will not be misguided by wrong or assumed data and their sources. In response to Trump’s tweet, one of the handles, Luke Zaleski, tweeted, “We cannot have the lie that Biden did not win the election perpetuate endlessly. Trump is now an alternate reality and a propaganda machine promising to run a renegade movement built on lies that undermine the US government and have already fomented violence and death and an attack.” Zaleski could say this only because he knows the reality and is familiar with Trump’s rhetoric and propaganda.

In September 2016, Hillary Clinton described a portion of Donald Trump’s supporters as “deplorables” in a speech, although she later clarified that she didn’t mean all of them. This term gained popularity on social media after her remarks. Before her comment, some users used a tool to reply quickly to Trump’s tweets, gaining attention. After Clinton’s speech, these users adopted “Deplorable” in their usernames. Searching for “deplorable” on Twitter quickly attracted thousands of followers.

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For instance, one user, FanFan, changed to “Deplorable Lucy” and saw their follower count soar from 1,000 to over 10,000. This group, alongside Russian trolls and bots, formed a cohesive network that supported Trump and influenced Twitter trends significantly (Prier, 2017, p. 71).

Clinton’s use of the term “deplorables” to describe some of Trump’s supporters was a pivotal moment in the 2016 election campaign. While she later clarified that she did not intend to label all of Trump’s supporters this way, the term quickly gained traction on social media. This illustrates how a single phrase or word choice by a prominent figure can reverberate widely and shape public discourse. It shows the power of language

in influencing public perception and attitudes. The adoption of “Deplorable” by online users as part of their usernames demonstrates how quickly and effectively narratives can spread on social media. It also underscores the role of social media platforms in magnifying messages, whether authentic or misleading. Fake news and manipulated narratives can gain momentum rapidly in such environments, potentially shaping public opinion and political outcomes. Political rhetoric can also potentially exacerbate societal divisions and entrench partisan identities, underscoring the challenge of fostering constructive dialogue and understanding across different viewpoints in an era dominated by social media echo chambers.

Figure 2:



Tweet by Zareef Rind

Furthermore, the emergence of digital writing and circulation challenges traditional notions of digital ownership. In contrast to physical artifacts like books, the lack of permanence associated with digital objects raises questions about who holds authority and agency

in the digital realm. It is acknowledged that digital ownership is a complex matter, as individuals cannot own the internet itself; instead, ownership is subject to the policies and decisions of the companies that govern these spaces. This lack of control among users is exemplified by platforms like Twitter, which retain the authority to ban users, prompting reflection on

the balance of power and agency in the digital context.

In the same way, Morelock (2018) says that Trump’s tweets are overwhelmingly negative and insulting, lacking any effort to encourage meaningful dialogue. Instead, they aim to shut down discussion and assert their own ideas as absolute

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truth. His attacks on independent journalism and the free press reflect a neo-fascist stance, portraying journalism as an enemy of his leadership. Trump has frequently used Twitter to insult and degrade a wide range of people and subjects. For instance, he has used words like ‘moron’ (52 times), ‘haters and losers’ (64 times), ‘pathetic’ (72 times), ‘dope or dopey’ (117 times), ‘stupid’ (183 times), ‘clown’ (45 times), ‘crooked’ (304 times), and more, as documented by *The New York Times* (223). Trump’s use of Twitter raises ethical questions for leaders: should they promote respectful dialogue for unity or prioritize power? His harsh rhetoric fuels online polarization and diminishes civil discourse, impacting how people engage with important issues. This underscores the need for media literacy, where users must discern biases in digital communication. Trump’s hostility towards journalism also challenges the media’s role in accountability and truth-telling, emphasizing their ethical duty amidst political pressures.

On the other hand, we cannot overlook the positive effects of circulation that help amplify the content to the masses and contribute to social justice and resistance. Such circulation promotes the values of inclusivity, social justice, and mindful contemplation needed to navigate dense and complex social and political structures. The Arab Spring experience – including the ongoing civil war in Syria – has demonstrated that social media can give international visibility to a cause and convey a sense of immediacy for action (Kringen 2012).

Post-structuralist theory adds another layer to this discussion, emphasizing the dynamic nature of language and meaning.

It highlights that texts lack fixed, final interpretations and that their meaning can shift depending on the context in which they are placed. This fluidity of meaning is particularly evident in digital content circulation, exemplified by the reinterpretation of phrases and elements from original texts in memes. The rationale behind circulation is to avoid misuse of language, which is used in different contexts for different purposes (MacLure, 2003). Post-structuralists believe language is always political, and the speaker imposes the meaning according to his or her interest, which is carried out in specific contexts. Verschueren (2008) shares Gumperz’s use of the context as:

The term “contextualization cue” can be used to describe any formal or structural indicator of how a piece of communication gains its meaning from being connected to its context...ranging from the way something is said (like tone or pauses) to how listeners respond (backchannel cues) or even when there is a switch in languages. The key point is that these cues prompt specific inferences or interpretations based on the expected meanings they are regularly linked with. (p. 23)

These signals are present in various elements of communication, such as our manner of speaking (like tone and pauses), how others react to us (listener responses), and even when there is a shift in languages. They give us an idea of what the communication is about. We are accustomed to linking these signals with specific meanings. For example, if someone nods while we are talking, we might anticipate that they agree. Contextualization cues are subtle

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indications in communication found in different aspects like our speech patterns, reactions from others, or even language changes. These indications shape our expectations about the meaning, and we are familiar with connecting them to specific understandings.

The meaning can be regenerated in another context according to the interest of the secondary user, which is more convenient in digital space. The digital content creator recontextualizes the language, visuality, and data already used in different contexts, mostly unethically. The source does not get credit, while recontextualizing the content in a different context changes the meaning, making it unethical. As digital space is being used as a powerful weapon for social mobilization beyond state apparatus, the authorities must scrutinize circulation to prevent unnecessary mass provocation through unethical circulation.

Conclusion

In this digital age, various social and digital media have become vulnerable and complex. This paper advocates for mindful circulation of writing, and only being critical about what to write, what to share, fact-checking, and keeping in mind the consequences of our “writing acts” can help sustain an engaging, just, inclusive, and harmonious world. Simultaneously, it is equally vital to recognize the transformative potential of circulatory practices. For example,

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the Black Lives Matter movement demonstrates how circulation can help identify societal issues, facilitate discussions, and ultimately contribute to their resolution, even in the face of potentially unethical behavior. The ease of information sharing prompts questions about the reliability of traditional news sources. Sharing content does not necessarily imply a seal of approval; factors like entertainment, emotional appeal, or intellectual stimulation can also influence it. This dynamic emphasizes the need to critically evaluate the role of digital platforms in shaping ethical relationships and fostering public trust in information sources. Promoting awareness of digital ethics becomes essential to combat the spread of misinformation. In order to be aware of the potential biases of digital spaces and to navigate them, we should understand how algorithms operate and engage in the mindful circulation of content.

Additionally, we must recognize the influence of capitalism in disseminating fake news, underscoring the importance of vigilance in determining information sources. To sum up, the digital age presents both opportunities and challenges, with ethical considerations taking center stage. Navigating this intricate landscape necessitates a nuanced understanding of technology’s implications, the media’s role, and the critical thinking requires in the face of evolving communication dynamics.

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