
Ethical issues of online social networks in Africa

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Abstract

The African debate about information technology in general, and OSNs in particular, is a debate on African identities arising out of processes of mutual respect or disrespect, and also from the social capabilities, natural environments, histories and cultures of African peoples. It concerns questions such as: What are the cultural and historical conditions underlying this debate in Africa? What are the bad and good practices of OSNs in Africa to date? How do mass media in conjunction with OSNs and other interactive digital media influence social and political movements in Africa? What is the impact of OSNs in other countries and cultures outside Africa on African societies? And, last but not least, what are the ethical values at stake when African people develop and use OSNs? The paper addresses some of these questions. In the first part, a brief account of OSNs in Africa is presented. The second part deals with OSNs from a phenomenological and ethical perspective. In the outlook, the role of the Africa Network for Information Ethics (ANIE) and of the newly created Africa Center of Excellence for Information Ethics (ACEIE) at the University of Pretoria, is explained. Both are important platforms for building a teaching research community on information ethical issues in Africa.

Introduction

Ethical issues of Online Social Networks (OSN) are at the core of the debate over free and fair information societies.(Marturano 2011) The following questions with regard to OSNs in Africa occur to me: What are the cultural and

historical conditions underlying this debate in Africa? What are the bad and good practices of OSNs in Africa to date? How do mass media in conjunction with OSNs and other interactive digital media influence social and political movements in Africa? What is the impact of OSNs in other countries and cultures outside Africa on African societies? And, last but not least, what are the ethical values at stake when African people develop and use OSNs? These questions address large and important fields of information ethics research and practices in Africa. What follows is a modest contribution to some of them (Mutula 2013).

From an ethical perspective OSNs are about how Africans freely shape their identities in the cyberworld and how OSNs influence their lives in the physical world with which it is intertwined. I define freedom as the open potential for individuals and groups to conceal and reveal themselves, their selves, in different contexts and for different purposes, being thus able to shape who they are, were and want to be (Capurro et al. 2013) The question of freedom of information and communication has a long history before digital technologies arose. The present ethical, social, technical and legal debate over OSNs concerns different possibilities for people's participation in political and cultural life, uses and abuses of power of the state as well as social media on ourselves as individuals and as society. (Buchmann 2012) Personal digital data allow the control and manipulation of citizens and customers based on what they conceal or reveal in digital networks, but they can also be used by people to empower themselves in the cyberworld to better shape their lives (Nissenbaum 2010) This ethical ambiguity is based on the popular imperative: 'Communicate everything all the time to everybody!' that allows some OSNs to disguise their economic ambitions with promises of a friendly and transparent life at the cost of using this information for undisclosed purposes without the informed consent of the users.

In the following, I present first a brief account of OSNs in Africa and deal, in the second part, with OSNs from a phenomenological and ethical perspective. In the outlook I underline the role of the Africa Network for Information Ethics (ANIE) and of the newly created Africa Center of Excellence for Information Ethics (ACEIE) at the University of Pretoria as two important platforms for building a teaching research community on information ethical issues in Africa.

OSNs in Africa

The potential for individuals and groups to freely conceal and reveal themselves in different contexts and for different purposes in the cyberworld is not only an issue of data protection but concerns the question of freedom itself. Issues of privacy, publicness and data protection in Africa from an ethical perspective were dealt with at the workshop on Africa Information Ethics and e-Government held on 23-27 February 2009 in Mount Grace, Magaliesburg, South Africa. This workshop under the patronage of UNESCO was organized by the University of Pretoria, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (USA) and the International Center for Information Ethics (ICIE), sponsored by the Department of Communications of South Africa (Country Reports 2010)

How widespread are OSNs in Africa today? Of course, this question presupposes an understanding of what OSNs are. For the moment it is enough to think of OSNs as dealing with all kinds of social interplay taking place in the cyberworld. When speaking about OSNs we usually think of social networking services such as Facebook or Twitter as well as of the options offered by mobile phones to use such services. Let us briefly take a look about what is going on in Africa on these matters. In his article “A social media boom begins in Africa: Using mobile phones, Africans join the global conversation” André-Michel Essoungou writes:

“In recent months Facebook — the major social media platform worldwide and currently the most visited website in most of Africa — has seen massive growth on the continent. The number of African Facebook users now stands at over 17 million, up from 10 million in 2009. More than 15 per cent of people online in Africa are currently using the platform, compared to 11 per cent in Asia. Two other social networking websites, Twitter and YouTube, rank among the most visited websites in most African countries” (Essoungou 2010a).

On the website *oAfrica* committed to exploring the dynamic of digital media in Africa, Tim Katlic stresses that we must deal carefully with data, particularly regarding Facebook. He writes:

“After all, Facebook’s profile information is essentially a survey in itself. When prompted upon signup, most users provide a country of residence. Of course, addresses aren’t validated so there is no way of knowing exactly who lives where. For example, many Diasporans list their birth nation in their account —

herein lies the cloudiness of the Facebook data. Still, empirical evidence suggests most users are honest when listing their geographic location, but there are probably more Facebook users than the data suggest.

Facebook adoption in Africa, although rapidly increasing within most nations at the moment, is starting to slow in more developmentally-advanced countries. Even if Facebook user growth rates settle at 25% annually, it could be ten years until Kenya boasts 30% of the population on Facebook. In 17 months, Kenya's Facebook user rate has gone from 2% to 3%. South Africa's is near 10% after increasing from 7%. This growth rate of 50% over 17 months for Kenya and South Africa – which we deem “mature” – suggests the challenges large nations face providing affordable Internet and connecting rural areas. Plus, even when Internet access is available, not everyone wants to use Facebook” (Katlic 2012). According to Katlic, the largest number of Facebook users, which is always in correlation to the largest population, are in Egypt (9.4m), South Africa (4.8m) and Nigeria (4.4m) (Katlic 2012).

When analyzing the “Africa Facebook Phenomenon in Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa’,” Willy Mutua remarks:

“Facebook has become a bit of a phenomenon amongst African youth. In Kenya it is not uncommon to find young people walking around, or sitting in *matatus* (*public transport*) glued to their mobile screens, not reading text messages or dialing but following the happenings in their Facebook ‘friendverse’ [...] From what we’ve found we can also conclude that Facebook is definitely the place to go to reach Africa’s urban youth. On average, the 18-25 age bracket represents the lion’s share of Africa’s Facebook population, which sounds pretty reasonable given the fact that this is the generation which is being exposed to the Internet and World Wide Web currently; they are also a fair amount of the general population of Africa; they are educated, urbanized and highly exposed to the modern world” (Mutua 2011)

Reporting on the first Twitter map of Africa called “How Africa Tweets” produced by Portland Communications and the media platform Tweetminster, Sébastien Seibt remarks that this map “reveals a connected continent” where there is “not one country in the whole of Africa where Twitter is not used” (Seibt 2012).

For Essoungou, it is through using mobile phones that “Africans join the global conversation”. He writes:

“Erik Hersman, a prominent African social media blogger and entrepreneur who helped drive development of the ground-breaking platform Ushahidi (see *Young Africans put technology to new uses*), is equally enthusiastic. In an e-mail to *Africa Renewal* he notes that ‘with mobile phone penetration already high across the continent, and as we get to critical mass with Internet usage in some of Africa’s leading countries (Kenya, South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Egypt) ... a seismic shift will happen with services, products and information’ (Essoungou 2010a).

But, as Essoungou stresses, Africa’s 100 million Internet users at the end of 2010 – and of some 140 million by end of 2011 with a penetration of 13.5% of the population, citing internet world stats – make up just a small percentage of the 2.2 billion people online around the world (Essoungou 2010a). Today, some 32.7% of the world population are online. Mobile phones are an excellent tool for empowering Africans. Essoungou reports that “Ms. Okolloh, along with four young bloggers from Kenya, launched the website Ushahidi, a communication forum that allows [users] to report cases of violence through text message, e-mail or web submission, and to portray the information on an online map. In order to ensure reliability, one member of the team used government sources, aid groups’ information and press reports to verify events submitted to Ushahidi (‘testimony’ in Swahili)” (Essoungou 2010)

To finish this brief account of the present role of OSNs in Africa, I would like to point to the 2012 Social Media World Africa conference and exhibition that was held at the Sandtom Convention Centre in Johannesburg on 10-13 September 2012. According to the announcement:

“This Africa’s only dedicated social media event. It is a two day strategic conference and a technology showcase exhibition. The conference features Senior Marketers from the largest brands case-studying the latest in social media innovation and excellence.”(Social Media World Africa 2010).

It is clear, I think, that the interest of industry in general, and the IT industry in particular, is an important indicator of the relevance of OSNs for African societies. Let us now take a closer look at what OSNs are and what ethical issues they give rise to.

Ethical issues of OSNs

“Why do we expect more from technology and less from each other”? My tentative answer to this question – it is I who is adding the question mark – raised by Sherry Turkle in her book “Alone Together” (Turkle 2011) is that we, in Western cultures since Modernity, have lost the capability of understanding ourselves, and our selves, as social beings sharing a common world, acknowledging, estimating and respecting each other – along with the corresponding negative phenomena – as well as of valuing and exchanging all kinds of goods and services that originate in the social in-between of our sharing a common world. The value we attribute to things is grounded in reciprocal social valuation. Instead of asking who we are, we are used to thinking in terms of what we are. We think then of our identity as a permanent substance or as a subject – both concepts take us back to the Greek concept of *hypokeimenon* and the Latin *subjectum* – that can be defined, valued, and handled like a thing. One consequence of understanding ourselves in this way, that is to say, by confusing who with what, is – being alone together in both the physical world and the cyberworld.

But what if we think of ourselves and our selves as being originally together, sharing a common world? What if we understand ourselves not as isolated selves within our consciousness inside our brains separated from the so called ‘outside world’? What if we understand our being in the world as valuing each other for what makes each one of us unique in her or his capabilities? What if we understand our mutual relationships not as mere interactions between neutral digital agents, but as an interplay of free selves? What if we understand the difference between who we are and what we conceal and/or reveal to others as residing at the core of human freedom? If we then look at the present-day digitally globalized world or *cyberworld*, it is not difficult to see that in such a world, which is not just *cyberspace*, we, that is to say, our selves, are represented as somewhats by bit-strings. On the basis of such selves reified as bit-strings, new forms of interplay for individual and social recognition are enabled, having impact not only on who we are, but also on what we are able to produce and value in both the physical and digital worlds (Capurro et al. 2013) I call this interplay of mutual recognition and estimation through which we build and understand commonalities and differences in individual and social identities the *cultural interplay*. Paying attention to cultural differences, then, is not just an issue of discovering more or less relevant differences about who we are that could or even should be surpassed by some kind of grand transcultural

philosophical theory to be applied any time and everywhere. They build, instead, the core of a free relationship between selves as different, embedded in their own histories as well as in concern and care for their individual and social lives. The South African philosopher, Lucas Introna, puts it this way:

“Whenever we find ourselves we find ourselves as concerned with our ongoing existence – we care about it. Not just to survive but to be somebody or something in particular (a father, husband, manager, leader, artist, etc.)” (Introna 2007:98). What we care about, as individuals and as communities, arises within the horizon of care for a shared disclosed world. It is this open horizon of a shared world that enables us not only to see the cultural differences between who we are, but also the various matters of concern. Introna continues:

“To be a community is to already share a world; to share a world is to already have a horizon of common concern (or caring or mattering). This common concern is the ongoing horizon in and through which things show up as meaningful, important, relevant, etc., i.e. show up as something that matters” (Introna 2007:99).

If we are not able to perceive ourselves as being originally together dealing with common concerns within a shared world, we might expect “more from technology and less from each other”, since we lack not only the others but also the world-openness itself for which we have a digital surrogate instead of understanding it as what it is, namely a cyberworld. Seen from this perspective, the rise of OSNs is a consequence of Modernity in its present digital shape. OSNs are ethically ambiguous. They reflect a digitally reified form of a self or a community sharing all kinds of concerns, practices, values and rules of behaviour in the physical world, but they can also be understood particularly, but not exclusively, in Western cultures as the missing real world in which we expect to meet others and make friends as quickly and easily as possible. These kinds of understanding ourselves and our customary rules of behaviour confront us with new techniques of cultural interplay. We might think, for instance, of the African tradition of *ubuntu* long since intertwined with various Western and Eastern traditions now being reified in various kinds of OSNs (Capurro 2007).

We are only at the beginning of a thorough phenomenological analysis of such cultural perceptions of the cyberworld, of various ways of being alone-together, or not, in both the physical world and cyberworld. The cyberworld in which OSNs are embedded might be seen as a convenience and boon as well as a danger that symptomatically reveals various kinds of individual and social pathologies (Capurro 2012) But the phenomenon of being alone-together can

also be understood in a more fundamental sense, namely, as the possibility for us humans to face the impossibility of being together building a seamless unity, not only with each other – a question greatly discussed since Aristophanes in Plato’s “Symposium” – but also with the world. Being “alone together” means then the experience of the world as an uncanny place revealed by an existential mood of loneliness, where neither my self nor others’ selves nor any scientific explanation or technical device can serve as an anchor when facing its facticity.

The philosopher, Santiago Zabala, has pointed to the difference between being online and being wired as two possibilities for existing in the cyberworld, where being wired means existing within the opportunities and constraints of an OSN in contrast to being online as using sporadically different kinds of online services such as e-mail. He writes:

“For the wired West the danger of the internet does not lie in going crazy from too many hours spent online, although this is becoming more common, but rather in considering a wired existence transparent, free, and vital for your life rather than an active threat. Although being wired assures you an identity on the web, that is, a position in the new wired world, it also frames your existence within the possibilities and limitations of the web. This is why Tim Berners-Lee, a founder of the web, recently pointed out how the ‘more you enter, the more you become locked in. Your social networking site becomes a central platform—a closed silo of content, and one that does not give you full control over your information in it’.” An autonomous life in the twenty-first century will depend on the distances we manage to maintain from the politics of control” (Zabala 2012).

Zabala, following Tim Berners-Lee, makes it clear, I think, where the key ethical issue of OSNs lies, is in the question concerning freedom and control. This is a question that concerns both individuals in their everyday life and entire societies, particularly since in both cases their wired lives become dependent on the values and rules of behaviour of a private company such as Facebook. The freedom to conceal and reveal who we are, as individuals, groups or a whole society, becomes then a matter of surveillance and control by the owners of such OSN monopolies (York 2011) This is why the question about privacy and publicness is so important for the present ethical debate over OSNs, the future shape of the cyberworld and its relation to the physical world (Trepte and Reinecke 2011) It is important to be aware that today’s predominant OSNs such as Facebook, represent but one possible configuration for social cyber-networks. Facebook as well as similar companies are not keen of privacy issues because their main marketing business model is based on the ownership of their

customers' freely revealed information about themselves. The less users know about such business practices, and the more Facebook gives them the impression of enabling them to freely 'design' their privacy, the more such dependency becomes hidden. It also mostly conforms to the laws of the company's country of origin. Dependency becomes hidden especially because users have the feeling of being free to conceal and reveal what they want about themselves. They also feel they have the power to forget, that is to say, to delete what they once revealed and now regard as 'oversharing.' This ethical ambiguity of a popular OSN such as Facebook is one reason for what Michelle Oosthuyzen, in her review of Geert Lovink's, "Networks Without a Cause. A Critique of Social media" (Lovink 2011), calls "the seductive power of Facebook". She writes:

"Also locked into the design of Facebook is the paradox of freedom, where individuals are not only tricked but also trick themselves into believing they are free in creating and discovering their identity on Facebook, when on the contrary, they are prisoners of Facebook's limiting design and range of pre-defined choices, sentenced with the burden and illusion of endless possibilities of becoming one's 'true' self. Likewise the freedom to connect to hundreds of people in one's social network eventually leads to the constraint of having to literally pay with our precious time and attention.

We shouldn't trust Facebook in being a healthy social space that reflects our social needs. Instead, these networks reflect the social norms according to which users will behave, that will secure the architecture and continuation of Facebook (Ibrahim 2008:245). We should no longer be naïve and trust commercial companies who deliver free services to ensure and protect our social norms, but take the responsibility of defining and living up to our own boundaries between the private and the public, the personal and the professional, instead of Facebook actively shaping it. However, due to the ubiquity and seductive power of these social technologies, it seems harder to cast a critical eye on our responsibility in either opposing or sustaining the evolving social norm of privacy" (Oosthuyzen 2012).

Facebook is not a carnivore but a 'datavore' system. It resembles Lewis Carroll's story about the Walrus, the Carpenter and the oysters:

"O oysters, come and walk with us!
The Walrus did beseech.
'A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk,
Along the briny beach

[...]
 'O oysters,' said the Carpenter,
 'You've had a pleasant run!
 Shall we be trotting home again?'
 But answer came there none—
 And this was scarcely odd, because
 They'd eaten every one."
 (Carroll 1960:234-235)

Where the Walrus is Mark Zuckerberg, the Carpenter is the programmer, and the oysters are the selves following them. What do we learn from this OSN story? "Never Give a Sucker an Even Break" (Fields 1941).

We as selves are built upon what Michel Foucault called "techniques de soi" (Foucault 1988) that allow us not only to know better who we are, but also to think about who we want to be (Capurro 1996, 2005) Human interplay is based on mutual trust, that is to say, on customary rules of *fair play* and mutual esteem, of self-determination and equality of opportunities, of informed consent and social and political participation. At the other end of the spectrum is human *foul play* where we have mistrust, dependency, manipulation, oppression, and social control, to mention just a few phenomena of degradation of a humane life and well-being. Shaping ourselves and our selves as individuals and as societies is a complex, risky and never-ending process based on multifarious kinds of life practices that allow us to criticize theoretically and practically the fallacy of opposing 'being alone' and 'being together'. They allow us also to acknowledge and estimate the diversity of selves as sharing a common world for which we should care (Capurro 2012).

Outlook

While preparing the ANIE pre-conference workshop that took place in Nairobi on 2-3 June 2012, Dennis Ocholla wrote the following comments on the questions that occurred to me when thinking about OSNs in Africa:

"Dear Rafael, You are raising very interesting issues most of which cannot be answered well by my generation and older (even slightly younger) in Africa without in-depth research. For example, when I look at myself, even now that I am on Sabbatical leave, I do not find myself interacting enough with social media as my children, 28 and 20 (more active), do. I always think (especially the younger one) that they can give a lecture on social media and – if directed

properly – give a strong insight into its ethical issues and problems. I also think that we (older) can also get involved with this medium intensively for research purposes. It would have been ideal to get some African study of these media for the workshop as you suggested earlier, even a quick survey, to give insight into the current situation and problems. I have been thinking about this approach for several days (looking for recruits/collaborators). Regards. Dennis” (Ocholla, personal communication, 6 February 2012).

Dennis is perfectly right in pointing not only to the issue of differences in the perception of social media between generations, but also to the fact that we need time for thinking together about these issues. Thinking needs time. It cannot be done under pressure or by command. It also needs the bonds of friendship that cannot be tied down by a digital “I like you’ button. An academic community that lacks friendship ends in the feeling of being alone together or in various forms of vanity and mistrust. This is why ANIE is not just a website and we, the members of ANIE, are not just digitally connected, but meet regularly face-to-face and take our time to understand and estimate each other better. Such meetings are the soul of ANIE. They are an African soul, which means that we are committed to issues of concern to the people of this continent, with its long and complex history that needs to be retrieved again and again to be able to understand today’s needs and tomorrow’s choices.

No technology is value-free. It is always situated within a given context, open to various kinds of developments in an open and risky process of individual and social evaluation. The role of ethics is to open a space of thought for looking back and forth on human life that is always shaped by selves in a process of mutual estimation and trust, taking care of a shared world, that is to say, a common place, a common history, a common care for present needs and future options. Being under the pressure of technological choices, we, as those responsible for the task of thinking, particularly within the framework of academic institutions, should try to take our time to look back at the presuppositions that are the conditions for both our present being and the perception of what is ‘new’ with regard to what is ‘old’. We need to consider what and why we think we should keep or give up this or that customary life-practice. This is the only way, I think, through which we can shape as individuals and as societies our selves, discovering and developing new ways of being human and enriching human diversity with the uniqueness of each human life as an individual and as a community. In both cases, cultural memory is a *conditio sine qua non* for the development of a free society because only insofar as we understand how we became who we are today, are we able to see and evaluate the new choices with their risks and opportunities. They are always

related to a specific social interplay and cannot be decided by others on our behalf, or without our consent, even though we know that this is what happens most of the time in many areas and situations. The task of ethics is, again, a critical task that should help us to point to such situations of alienation and oppression.

From this perspective, the debate about information technology in general, and OSNs in particular, is a debate on African identities arising out of processes of mutual respect or disrespect, and also from the social capabilities, natural environments, histories and cultures of African peoples. Africa is an old and a young continent, full of people with innovative ideas and aspirations, particularly in African universities, as can be experienced every day in the institutes. Our community should offer them a space for free thinking about their lives, retrieving their past and evaluating present and future options. Together we should try to develop a research agenda for information ethics in Africa and to invite our students to engage in ethical research that deals with the big questions: who are we now as Africans? and who do we want to be in the future? In the introduction to his book, "Networks Without a Cause", Geert Lovink writes: "Once the internet changed the world; now the world is changing the internet" (Lovink 2011:1). I wish Africans will soon be able to say: 'Once OSNs changed Africans; now Africans are changing OSNs.'

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