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Abstract: Beginning with the initial premise that as the Internet has a global character, the paper will argue that the normative evaluation of digital information on the Internet necessitates an evaluative model that is itself universal and global in character [1]. The paper will show that information has a dual normative structure that commits all disseminators of information to both universal epistemological and ethical norms. Based on the dual normative characterization of information the paper will seek to demonstrate: (1) that information and internet information (interformation) specifically, has an inherent normative structure that commits its producers, disseminators, communicators and users, everyone in fact that deals with information, to certain mandatory epistemological and ethical commitments; and (2) that the negligent or purposeful abuse of information in violation of the epistemological and ethical commitments to which it gives rise is also a violation of universal rights to freedom and wellbeing. These are universal rights to which all agents are entitled by virtue of being agents, and in particular informational agents.

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The Epistemology and Ethics of Internet Information

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Abstract   Beginning with the initial premise that as the Internet has a global character, the paper will argue that the normative evaluation of digital information on the Internet necessitates an evaluative model that is itself universal and global in character [1][1]. The paper will show that information has a dual normative structure that commits all disseminators of information to both universal epistemological and ethical norms. Based on the dual normative characterization of information the paper will seek to demonstrate: (1) that information and internet information (*interformation*) specifically, has an inherent normative structure that commits its producers, disseminators, communicators and users, everyone in fact that deals with information, to certain mandatory epistemological and ethical commitments; and (2) that the negligent or purposeful abuse of information in violation of the epistemological and ethical commitments to which it gives rise is also a violation of universal rights to freedom and wellbeing. These are universal rights to which all agents are entitled by virtue of being agents, and in particular *informational agents*.

1.   Introduction

The overall primary objective of this paper is to describe and propose a meta-ethical as well as normative model for the theoretical and practical evaluation of the quality of digital information on the Internet. This model I shall argue must of necessity be universal and objective in its mode of justification and motivation and global in its reach. It has to be able to transcend cultural boarders[2] so as to be able to objectively evaluate the quality of information that is in its essence borderless and global.

Given the global reach and scope of the World Wide Web that now reaches and impacts on every part of the planet, any theoretical model that seeks to not merely describe the cultural quality of interformation but *evaluate* it, at least in its epistemological and ethical manifestations, must itself be global in its application and scope. For it to be global in its application, however, it has to be universal and objective in its mode of justification and motivation. It must be able to evaluate interformation on the basis of universal principles. Principle that most if not all reasonable individuals, irrespective of their cultural differences and affiliations, can accept and more importantly must accept on the basis of their shared minimal rationality.

The main aim of the paper is to provide a solution to this problem by proposing a universal theoretical model which can provide at least in principle, a method for evaluating objectively interformation in all its modes of dissemination across the globe. The proposed solution comprises two main parts that together seek to show that information is *doubly normative:*

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[1] I agree, therefore, with Gorniak-Kocikowska's claim that because of its global nature "computer ethics has to be regarded as global ethics" (1996).

[2] Unless otherwise specified, I will use the term *cultural boarders* to refer to all type of boarders, including geographical, national, ethnic (ethnic boarders within multi-ethnic nations such as the USA, Canada and Australia, for example), religious, gender, political, and lifestyle boarders.

(A) Information and internet information (*interformation*) specifically, has an inherent normative structure that commits its producers, communicators and users (*disseminators*), everyone in fact that deals with information, to certain mandatory epistemological and ethical commitments;

(B) The negligent or purposeful abuse of information in violation of the epistemological and ethical commitments, to which its normative inherent structure gives rise, is also a violation of universal rights – specifically, universal rights to freedom and wellbeing to which all agents are entitled by virtue of being agents, and in particular *informational agents*.

Hence, the abuse of information through, for example, misinformation practices, constitutes (a) a violation of the epistemological and ethical commitments to which the normative inherent structure of information gives rise and (b) a violation of universal rights to which all agents and specifically informational agents are entitled.

Finally and echoing comments by Umberto Eco in *The Open Work* (1989) [2] – namely, that with regard to human beings information theory becomes communication theory - the paper will also show that the demonstrated dual normative structure of information confirms and supports Eco's insightful comments.

2. The Normative Structure of Information

In providing the dual normative model for the evaluation of information and interformation specifically, outlined above, the paper will employ an epistemological account of information based on a minimal *nuclear* definition of information. Following Luciano Floridi it will define *information* as "well formed meaningful data that is truthful" (2005) [3] and following Fred Dretske it will define information as *"an objective commodity capable of yielding knowledge"*; knowledge in turn will be defined as "information caused belief" (1999) [4].

What is necessary for both information and knowledge is truth. For information without truth is not strictly speaking information but either *misinformation* (the unintentional dissemination of well-formed and meaningful false data) or *disinformation* (the intentional dissemination of false "information").

Using the minimal account of information described above, the paper will now develop a *normative account of information*, which demonstrates and describes the generic ethical commitments that necessarily arise in the dissemination of information.

Briefly, the argument is as follows: Since information is a type of knowledge (it must be capable of yielding knowledge, one must be able to learn from it) it must comply with the epistemological conditions of knowledge, specifically, that of truth. And insofar as the dissemination of information is based on the justified and rightful expectation among its disseminators that such information should meet the minimal condition of truth, then the disseminators of information are committed to certain widely recognized and accepted epistemological criteria. Those epistemic criteria will in the main comprise objectivity as well as the independence, reliability, accuracy and trustworthiness of the *sources* that generate the information. The epistemology of information in turn commits its disseminators to certain ethical principles and values, such as honesty, sincerity, truthfulness, trustworthiness and reliability (also epistemological values), and fairness, including justice, which requires the equal distribution of the informational goods to all citizens. Thus in terms of its dissemination, information has an intrinsic normative structure that commits everyone involved in its creation, production, search, communication, consumption and multiple other uses to epistemological and ethical norms. These norms being intrinsic to the normative structure of information are rationally unavoidable and thus not merely optional.

3. Information and Universal Rights

The goal of the following argument is to show that apart from committing its disseminators to unavoidable epistemological and ethical standards information commits its disseminators to respect for peoples' universal rights to freedom and wellbeing. That is, information must not be disseminated in ways that violate peoples' fundamental rights to freedom and wellbeing (*generic rights*) individually or collectively, or undermine their capacity for self-fulfilment (Negative Rights). In addition, information must as far as possible be disseminated in ways that secure and promote peoples' generic rights and capacity for self-fulfilment (Positive Rights) when (a) those rights cannot be secured or promoted by agents themselves and (b) can be so secured and promoted by

other agents at no comparable cost to them (Gewirth 1998, Spence 2006) [5,6]. But from where does this authority come and what are the fundamental rights to which I refer? Alan Gewirth's Principle of Generic Consistency (PGC) offers a description and prescription for both the rational authority (based primarily on instrumental and deductive rationality) and the content of the fundamental rights (freedom=FR and wellbeing=WB) that persons have necessarily and only by virtue (sufficient reason) of being purposive agents.

Due to constraints of space, I cannot provide a justification for Alan Gewirth's argument for the Principle of Generic Consistency (PGC) on which his derivation of rights is based, as this is well beyond the scope and limits of this paper. I offer such a detailed defense in my *Ethics Within Reason: A Neo-Gewirthian Approach* (2006) [6]. I will, however, offer a brief summary of the rationale of the argument for the PGC by way of a schematic outline of the three major steps of that argument.

3.1 The Rights of Agents: The Rationale for Alan Gewirth's Argument for the Principle of Generic Consistency[3]

Gewirth's main thesis is that every rational agent, in virtue of engaging in action, is logically committed to accept a supreme moral principle, the Principle of Generic Consistency. The basis of his thesis is found in his doctrine that action has a normative structure, and because of this structure every rational agent, just in virtue of being an agent, is committed to certain necessary prudential and moral constraints.

Gewirth undertakes to prove his claim that every agent, *qua* agent, is committed to certain prudential and moral constraints in virtue of the normative structure of action in three main stages. First, he undertakes to show that by virtue of engaging in voluntary and purposive action, every agent makes certain implicitly evaluative judgments about the goodness of his purposes, and hence about the necessary goodness of his freedom and wellbeing, since they are the necessary conditions for the fulfillment of his purposes. Secondly, he undertakes to show that by virtue of the necessary goodness which an agent attaches to his freedom and wellbeing, the agent implicitly claims that he has rights to these. At this stage of the argument, these rights being merely self-regarding are only prudential rights.

Thirdly, Gewirth undertakes to show that every agent must claim these rights in virtue of the sufficient reason that he is a *prospective purposive agent* (PPA) who has purposes he wants to fulfill. Furthermore, every agent must accept that, since he has rights to his freedom and wellbeing for the sufficient reason that he is a PPA, he is logically committed, on pain of self-contradiction, to also accept the rational generalization that all PPAs have rights to freedom and wellbeing (Gewirth 1978, 48- 128) [8]. At this third stage of the argument these rights being not only self-regarding but also other-regarding, are moral rights. The conclusion of Gewirth's argument for the PGC is in fact a generalized statement for the PGC, namely, that all PPAs have universal rights to their freedom and wellbeing.

Applying the PGC to information, we can now make the further argument that information generally and interformation specifically, must not be disseminated in ways that violate informational agents' rights to F and WB, individually or collectively, (Negative Rights). Moreover, information must as far as possible be disseminated in ways that secure and promote the informational agents' rights to F and WB (Positive Rights). Conceived as the Fourth Estate, this places a significant and important responsibility on the media, especially journalists, both offline and online.

For example, certain media practices such as *media release journalism* (Simmons. P and Spence, E.H., 2006) [9], misleadingly and deceptively disseminate media release information produced by Public Relations professionals via print or broadcast media sources (newspapers, television and radio) as "news", without any disclosure that these so called "news stories" are sourced from media releases produced by PR professionals on behalf of their clients. This is often verbatim and sometimes with the journalists' bylines attached to them. Such practices are therefore ethically objectionable. They are so, because they are designed to deceive and do deceive the public by stealth, sometimes in collusion with journalists and government representatives. Moreover, these practices constitute corruption for they are conducive to the corruption of the informational processes and products that are essential for informing citizens on matters of public interest in an objective, truthful and fair manner [10, 11, 12, and 13].

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[3] A full and detailed defense of the argument for the PGC against all the major objections raised against it by various philosophers can be found in Spence 2006 (Chapters 1 to 3) [6], Beyleveld 1991 [7] and Gewirth 1978 [8].

Such practices, which once appeared only in the old corporate media (newspapers, television and radio), have increasingly become more prevalent on the Internet, for example, in blogs. Media deception is demonstrably unethical on the basis of the PGC because it can actually or potentially at least violate the rights to freedom and wellbeing that people have generally as agents and specifically, as citizens. And citizens require accurate, reliable and trustworthy information on matters of public interest. More generally, media deception through collusion by PR professionals, journalists and government representatives, violate all citizens' rights to freedom and wellbeing collectively by undermining the democratic process itself. For democracy requires the truthful, fair and objective production and dissemination of information on all matters of public interest. It is partly for that reason that media control is sought and exercised by totalitarian regimes, such as those in China and Iran for example, that do not want their citizens to be well informed.

3.2 Interim Conclusion

Information generally can be epistemologically and ethically evaluated *internally* by reference to its inherent normative structure. That structure commits its disseminators, to ethical and epistemological norms. This is especially true of professional communicators (Journalists and PR Consultants, for example, on-line and off-line). Since the ethical values to which the inherent normative structure of information gives rise require that the informational agents' rights to F and WB should be respected, secured and promoted, those values are also mandated by the PGC. Thus information can also be *externally* evaluated by reference to the PGC. *Expressive Information* can also be evaluated either internally or externally or both, in this way. For example, *identity theft* on the Internet is morally wrong both because it is untruthful (internal evaluation) and because it can cause harm (external evaluation).

4. Information as Communication

In *The Open Work* (1989) [2] Umberto Eco makes a very interesting and pertinent comment to the present concerns of this paper. He claims that,

> "It would indeed be possible to show that the mathematical concept of information cannot be applied to the poetic message, or to any other message, because information… is a characteristic of the *source* of messages: the moment this initial equiprobability is filtered, there is selection and therefore order, and therefore meaning….The objection is perfectly correct if we consider information theory only as a complex of mathematical rules used to measure the transmission of bits from a source to a receiver. But the moment the transmission concerns *information among human beings* [added emphasis] information theory becomes a theory of communication…" (1989:66) [2].

Given the space constraints of this paper I will not be able to offer but the briefest analysis of Eco's insightful and promising comment. Eco's comment is insightful and promising because it points in the same conceptual analytical direction as the present paper. That is to say, it clearly articulates what this paper only implicitly suggests that with regard to *information among human beings information theory becomes a theory of communication*.

As a point of departure from Eco's penetrating comment, the present paper further and with some novelty argues moreover that information theory as a theory of communication commits its disseminators to certain epistemological and ethical norms. It does so by virtue of its dual normative structure: firstly, because being a teleological orientated activity in its own right that *aims* at truth or truthfulness (has as its *telos* or *goal* truth or truthfulness), information as communication has an inherent normative structure that universally commits all its disseminators to both epistemological and ethical normative standards; and secondly, information as a form of communication among informational agents universally commits all informational agents to the respect of the rights of freedom and wellbeing of all informational agents. This as we saw above requires that information must not be abused and misrepresented in the form of different types of misinformation in ways that violate those rights. Such purposeful misinformation constitutes under certain

conditions, a form of *corruption*: the corruption of information as a process and product of communication[4] [14].

5. Conclusion

Beginning with the initial premise that as the Internet has a global character, the paper argued that the normative evaluation of digital information on the Internet necessitates an evaluative model that is itself universal and global in character[5].

The paper then proceeded to show that information has a dual normative structure that commits all disseminators of information to both universal epistemological and ethical norms. Based on the dual normative structure of information the paper sought to demonstrate that (1) information and internet information (*interformation*) specifically, has an inherent normative structure that commits its disseminators to certain mandatory epistemological and ethical commitments; and (2) that informational agents have universal rights to freedom and wellbeing that renders the negligent or purposeful abuse of information in violation of the epistemological and ethical commitments to which it inherently gives rise, ethically objectionable.

Finally, using Umberto Eco's insightful comments that with regard to information among human beings information theory becomes a theory of communication, the paper was further able to confirm Eco's claim that information theory among human beings becomes indeed a theory of communication. It does so by demonstrating that when information becomes communication, as it must with regard to informational practices among human agents, it unavoidably and universally gives rise to both epistemological and ethical commitments.

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[4] For a detailed account of informational corruption see Edward H. Spence (forthcoming Autumn 2008) Media Corruption, *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* [14].

[5] I agree, therefore, with Gorniak-Kocikowska's claim that because of its global nature "computer ethics has to be regarded as global ethics" (1996) [1].