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Ethics in the Internet Environment

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ETHICS IN THE INTERNET ENVIRONMENT

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ABOUT THE GLOBAL COMMISSION ON INTERNET GOVERNANCE

The Global Commission on Internet Governance was established in January 2014 to articulate and advance a strategic vision for the future of Internet governance. The two-year project conducts and supports independent research on Internet-related dimensions of global public policy, culminating in an official commission report that will articulate concrete policy recommendations for the future of Internet governance. These recommendations will address concerns about the stability, interoperability, security and resilience of the Internet ecosystem.

Launched by two independent global think tanks, the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) and Chatham House, the Global Commission on Internet Governance will help educate the wider public on the most effective ways to promote Internet access, while simultaneously championing the principles of freedom of expression and the free flow of ideas over the Internet.

The Global Commission on Internet Governance will focus on four key themes:

- enhancing governance legitimacy — including regulatory approaches and standards;

- stimulating economic innovation and growth — including critical Internet resources, infrastructure and competition policy;

- ensuring human rights online — including establishing the principle of technological neutrality for human rights, privacy and free expression; and

- avoiding systemic risk — including establishing norms regarding state conduct, cybercrime cooperation and non-proliferation, confidence-building measures and disarmament issues.

The goal of the Global Commission on Internet Governance is two-fold. First, it will encourage globally inclusive public discussions on the future of Internet governance. Second, through its comprehensive policy-oriented report, and the subsequent promotion of this final report, the Global Commission on Internet Governance will communicate its findings with senior stakeholders at key Internet governance events.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ethics is a key value of society. But the reality is that ethics serves more as a proclaimed virtue than as a standard to be applied in real life. For example, ethical issues have been addressed in the latest Internet governance discussions; however, the importance of ethics has not been adequately stated. Moreover, in connection with many different online social networks, the need for clear ethical standards to protect users' privacy should be emphasized. This paper analyzes the lack of appropriate accountability for ethical standards in Internet governance and develops ideas for improving the ethics environment.

ETHICS AS AN ELEMENT OF THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

NOTION OF ETHICS

The term "ethos" as used in Ancient Greece encompasses two different meanings — depending on which of the word's spelling variants one chose to use — namely habit and custom, or character and morals. Consequently, ethos reflects guiding beliefs or ideals governing the community, such as — according to Aristotle — practical skills, wisdom, virtue, goodness and goodwill. As a result, ethos has the pursuit of a good life as its teleological goal.[1] In ancient times, ethics was linked to natural law, as in Sophocles' play *Antigone.* In clear opposition to King Creon, Antigone does not claim a personal (individual) human right; instead she refers to God's unwritten and unfailing laws. From this perspective, ethical behaviour is seen as a reflection of basic normative principles. The ensuing expectations naturally lead to presumptions about the desired actions and crystallize in a system of rules and institutions that underpin civil society.

In more modern times, ethos started to become an important notion for the legal philosophers of the seventeenth century.[2] Hobbes expressed the opinion that human identity is founded less in the collective social order than in an individual's autonomous rights to exercise his or her natural potential. According to Locke, the identity of an individual vested with self-sustaining attributes reflects natural freedom. Only Rousseau changed the discourse by advocating for a transformation from the natural man to the social man. In Kant's understanding, the moral dignity of the individual must be developed, since humanity is itself a dignity. In other words, for Kant, ethics refers to "right" or "wrong" conduct as part of the philosophy of human behaviour.

Ethics is about acting morally. From a general perspective, morals refer to the empirically valid "established conventions" of any social group. That is, the notion of ethics encompasses the "socially valid moral rights, duties and behavioural norms deriving from a culture-specific tradition" (Ulrich 2008, 31). Ethos therefore can then be seen as an individual's personal conviction, his or her "self-conception in regard to identity and legitimacy" (ibid.). Thus individuals have to justify the moral principles on which their lives are based (ibid.).

Ethics as an academic discipline evaluates normative claims from a transparent and unbiased perspective. Ethics thereby addresses principles or rules that state something about good human actions. Three types of ethics describe its applicable scope (Monteiro 2014). *Descriptive, or empirical, ethics* outlines the multiple appearances of practised morals and the customs of individuals, groups, institutions and cultures. *Normative ethics* examines existing attitudes toward morality and frames action-oriented norms. *Meta-ethics* critically scrutinizes ethical methods and extends them.

OBJECTIVES OF ETHICS

Ethics addresses the following concerns (Monteiro 2014): Ethical thinking should reflect the position of those affected by valid moral claims, familiarize them with the critical assessment of practical procedures and encourage attention to issues of social responsibility and moral competence. Ethics also fosters a long-term view of business relationships, that is, fidelity and fiduciary responsibility, as developed in Confucian thinking based on the concept of filial piety (Miles and Goo 2013).

The following fundamental ethical values are relevant to the development of the information society (Global Ethics Network for Applied Ethics 2013; Weber 2015a).

- *Justice/equity:* Every individual has an inalienable dignity and is entitled to equal rights; deep respect for each other cultivates justice; fair and equal access to information enables members of civil society to reach for bilateral understanding.

- *Freedom:* Human dignity calls for the development of various freedoms: in the Internet context, for example, the freedom of expression, of beliefs and of access to information. As a consequence, freedom, equality and responsibility must balance each other.

- *Care and compassion:* A capacity for empathy and respect leads to solidarity and reciprocal support.

- *Participation:* The right and ability to participate in societal life and in important decision-making processes are core values.

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1   See Weber (2015a, 100-101) for a general overview.

2   See Indaimo (2015, 16–32) for more details.

- *Sharing:* The sharing of information and knowledge in the Internet context enables and leads to sustainable relationships between human beings, and, as a result, strengthens communities.

- *Sustainability:* In the long term, sustainable projects are significant for the protection of a viable environment for all human beings.

- *Responsibility:* Assuming accountability for one's own actions is a core requirement in a societal setting. The level of responsibility must correspond to the levels of the individual's power, capacity and capability.

These different ethical values are interlinked and can balance each other. In contrast to diverging human rights (for example, freedom of expression versus privacy), direct conflicts of interests hardly exist between the ethical values described above. Human rights can even be seen as formalized ethics (Global Ethics Network for Applied Ethics 2013).

SCOPE OF ETHICS IN THE INTERNET ENVIRONMENT

The realization of ethics depends on the opportunities and willingness to apply them in practical life. As the objectives of ethics clearly show, virtually no space in the information society lies outside of the behavioural rules that can guide moral actions. Since the ethical values are interlinked, their scope is almost unlimited.

Regarding the importance of practical circumstances, two case studies might help to identify the actual main challenges for ethical principles. The first case study examines the treatment of ethics in the many and diverse Internet governance declarations adopted during the past 10 years. The second study considers social network providers' compliance with ethical standards. Each study shows the practical challenges in implementing ethics principles and further suggests how some of the benefits of ethical behaviour can be achieved.

These two case studies have been deliberately chosen to address different societal fields. Internet governance is a global issue involving many stakeholders and requires the design of general rules for interconnected network infrastructures; that is, Internet governance plays at a macro level. In contrast, the relationships between social networks and their users are based on contracts, whatever their form; these relationships occur at the micro level. For such reasons, the two case studies attempt to approach ethics from different angles. Thereafter, the question of whether generally applicable notions of ethics can be developed is tackled.

ETHICS IN INTERNET GOVERNANCE

The role of ethics has come up in Internet governance discussions at various fora, but the issue has never been the main focus. The next section summarizes a detailed analysis (Weber 2015b) of the current state of the discussion, as published in a recent United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report.[3]

ETHICS AS A KEY ELEMENT IN INTERNET GOVERNANCE DECLARATIONS

More than 11,000 participants from 175 countries attended the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva in December 2003. At the end of the Summit, which was aimed at establishing the foundations for an information society, the "Declaration of Principles" (WSIS 2003a) and the "Plan of Action" (WSIS 2003b) were among the statements adopted that made ethics a subject of discussion.

The Geneva "Declaration of Principles" seeks to ensure that everyone can benefit from the opportunities of information and communication technology (ICT). It declares that addressing the ethical dimensions of the information society is a key principle for all stakeholders in building an inclusive information society (WSIS 2003a, number 19). The declaration exhorts the information society to respect peace and uphold fundamental values such as freedom, solidarity and shared responsibilities (ibid., number 56) and, by highlighting the importance of ethics for the information society, invites all actors to take appropriate actions and preventive measures (ibid., number 59). In this context, the document calls for the responsible use and treatment of information by the media in accordance with the highest ethical standards (ibid., number 55). Advocating an information society that is subject to universally held values, promotes the common good and prevents abusive reliance on ICT (WSIS 2003b, number 25), the "Geneva Plan of Action" invites all stakeholders to increase their awareness of the ethical dimensions of Internet use (ibid., number 25.c) and further encourages all relevant stakeholders to continue to research the ethical dimensions of ICT (ibid., number 25.d).

In May 2013, almost one decade later, the "Global Ethics Network for Applied Ethics" published its discussion paper, "Ethics in the Information Society: The Nine 'P's,'" on ethical issues related to the Internet (Global Ethics Network for Applied Ethics 2013). The document calls for value-based decisions and actions in the development of information, communication and knowledge (ibid., preface). It discusses ethical values (ibid., 8), the ethics of information professions (ibid., 14) and the ethics of regulation and freedom (ibid., 24). The paper also

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3   See also Weber (2015a, 96–100).

advocates for an ethical dimension as a fundamental pillar of the information society post 2015 (ibid., 26) and calls for experts under the aegis of the international organizations concerned to further discuss the principles of an ethical information society. Private sector enterprises should take the initiative in introducing ethics into the information society (ibid., 27). All in all, the future governance of the Internet should be based upon ethical values (ibid., 27-28).

The "Riga Guidelines on Ethics in the Information Society," as agreed upon by the Riga Global Meeting of Experts on the Ethical Aspects of Information Society in October 2013 (UNESCO 2013), are meant to encourage debate on the ethical challenges of the information society (ibid., number 2), raise awareness of the ethical implications of the ICT use and development (ibid., number 4), and demand the support and participation of all interested stakeholders in the discussion of information ethics (ibid., number 5). The guidelines call on policy makers to be ready to give consideration to ethical principles (ibid., number 8) and to support policy makers' development of ethically informed frameworks and decision-making tools based on universal human rights and ethical principles (ibid., number 10).

UNESCO is considered the most important organization offering a constant review of ethics issues. Its document "UNESCO and the ethical dimensions of the information society" of September 14, 2012, addresses the organization's key role in developing ethical perspectives to enable social and human progress for the information society (UNESCO 2012, 7), its contribution to the international debate on the ethical dimensions of the information society (ibid., 8), ongoing global efforts in the field of ethical dimensions of the information society (ibid.), and proposals for possible ways UNESCO could address ethical dimensions of the information society (ibid., 9-10). Besides that, its "Reflection and Analysis by UNESCO on the Internet," adopted by UNESCO on April 18, 2011, also acknowledges ethical standards as being essential (UNESCO 2011).

GENERAL REFERENCES TO ETHICS IN INTERNET GOVERNANCE DECLARATIONS

A number of declarations, guidelines and frameworks mention ethical issues in the context of other topics:

The "Tunis Agenda for the Information Society," adopted at the WSIS in November 2005, calls for the responsible use and treatment of information by the media in accordance with the highest ethical and professional standards (WSIS 2005, number 90).

The "Tshwane Declaration on Information Ethics in Africa" was adopted by the participants of the African Information Ethics Conference: Ethical Challenges in the Information Age, on February 7, 2007 (African Information Ethics 2007). The declaration considers ethics in the Internet as being a matter of critical reflection on moral values and practices with regard to the production, storage, distribution and access to knowledge. The declaration notes the necessity of ethical reflections on norms and values and points to the important role that information ethics should play in African education and policy in fostering social, cultural and economic development (ibid., preamble). According to the declaration, policies and practices regarding the generation, dissemination and utilization of information in and about Africa should be grounded in ethics based on universal human values, human rights and social justice.

The final recommendations of the European Conference on Ethics and Human Rights in the Information Society of September 2007 emphasize the need to proclaim universal ethical principles (UNESCO 2007, number 2), to monitor issues relating to ethics in knowledge societies (ibid., number 3), to translate principles into codes of ethics at all levels (ibid., number 4), and to encourage and develop ethics (ibid., number 6).

In 2013 the Working Party on Internet-mediated Research, under the auspices of the British Psychological Society (2013), published the *Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research.* The guidelines outline some key issues that researchers are advised to keep in mind when considering the implementation or evaluation of an Internet-mediated research study. They reinforce the main ethics principles as outlined in the British Psychological Society's (2010) *Code of Human Research Ethics,* namely, respect for the autonomy and dignity of persons, scientific value and social responsibility, as well as the maximizing of benefits and minimizing of harm to persons.

On May 12, 2014, the Council of the European Union published the *EU Human Rights Guidelines on Freedom of Expression Online and Offline* (Council of the European Union 2014), pointing to, among other things, the fact that an open society based on the rule of law needs an independent and pluralistic media environment off-line and online for operating effectively. It further suggests that society needs to encourage the promotion of mechanisms such as media ethics codes within third countries (countries outside the European Union) to enhance media accountability (ibid., number 32.g).

Some additional declarations and guidelines mention ethical issues without elaborating on the specifics of the individual values:

The Internet Activities Board's "Ethics and the Internet" document of 1989 deals with ethics in general. Giving examples of unethical behaviour, the Internet Activities Board (1989, 2) characterizes as unethical and unacceptable any activity that purposely seeks to gain unauthorized access to the resources of the Internet, disrupts the intended use of the Internet, destroys the integrity of computer-based information and/or compromises users' privacy.

The "Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace," published by UNESCO in October 2003, states that ICT training should not be limited to the provision of technical competences but should also include awareness of ethical principles and values (UNESCO 2003, 19).

According to "The Seoul Declaration for the Future of the Internet Economy," adopted in June 2008 under the auspices of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the secure and responsible use of the Internet should be promoted and international social and ethical norms are to be respected (OECD 2008).

Without addressing ethics in more detail, the "African Platform on Access to Information Declaration" of September 2011 calls on media to respect professional ethics and journalism standards (African Platform on Access to Information Campaign 2011, 8).

In February 2013, the WSIS+10 Conference issued a "Final Statement: Information and Knowledge For All," inviting all stakeholders to discuss the ethical challenges of emerging technologies and the information society (WSIS+10 2013, 3).

The Special Rapporteurs from the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Organization of American States and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights agreed on a "Joint Declaration on Universality and the Right on Freedom of Expression" in May 2014 that, without discussing ethical aspects in detail, recommends that media play a positive role in countering discrimination, stereotypes, prejudices and biases by adhering to the highest professional and ethical standards (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe 2014, number 2.c.).

Also without addressing ethics in detail, the "Bali Road Map," adopted at the Global Media Forum in Bali in August 2014, supports the promotion of respect for the highest professional and ethical standards in journalism (Global Media Forum 2014, number 1).

The "Nairobi Declaration on the Post 2015 Development Agenda" of November 2014, as agreed at the Global Forum for Media Development in Nairobi, highlights poor ethical values in some sectors of society, including governments, the private sector and the general public (Global Forum for Media Development 2014, observations). The declaration recommends that media regulatory bodies, media professional associations and unions and the media community in general ensure that the media around the world maintain ethical standards (ibid., recommendations).

INTERIM ASSESSMENT

This detailed analysis shows that the subject of ethics is addressed in many Internet governance declarations, guidelines and frameworks but that its treatment is rather disparate. In substance, the importance of ethics is not adequately reflected. For example, drawing on the general objectives of ethics, basic values such as justice and equity, participation and sustainability are not adequately taken into account. The key value of responsibility is also underestimated.

In a nutshell, much has been written, but the diverse quantity of review is lacking the substantive quality needed to result in adequate ethical standards in Internet governance. As a consequence, a more accurate assessment of the main ethical principles in the digital environment appears to be necessary.[4]

ETHICS IN SOCIAL NETWORKS

Online social networks such as Facebook, Google, Twitter and others have not only wide-ranging economic but also social and cultural impacts on the online world. Having enjoyed a vast increase in members and users during the past few years, online social networks have now recognized that compliance with ethical principles is a reputational issue. Acting in compliance with ethical principles improves the reputation of social networks, which in turn helps to gain users' trust and makes the service providers more attractive to potential customers. Of course, gaining and retaining more customers also enhances the networks' advertising revenues.

Therefore, at least rhetorically, social networks increasingly proclaim the ethical standards they follow as well as the corporate social responsibility (CSR) principles they observe. The public statements of social networks do not necessarily coincide with the reality, however. For that reason, it is worth examining the compliance by social networks with ethical principles in practice and at the micro level of ethics.

CONTRACTUAL RELATIONS: THEORY AND REALITY

The public announcements of social networks that they comply with high ethical standards must be mirrored in reality; that is, the practical implementation of the standards must be subject to review. As an example, the activities of the microblogging site Twitter (twitter.com) and of other social networking sites are assessed here. These service providers offer users from all over the globe opportunities to share personal information and to participate in public discourse.

However, commercial imperatives, particularly the interests of the advertising industry, tend to direct user participation to an asymmetrical private regulation, mainly expressed in the social networks' terms of service — which do not necessarily take into account the interests of the users

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4   See "Lessons for Improving the Ethics Environment" below.

Figure 1: Relations between Ethics and Business Principles
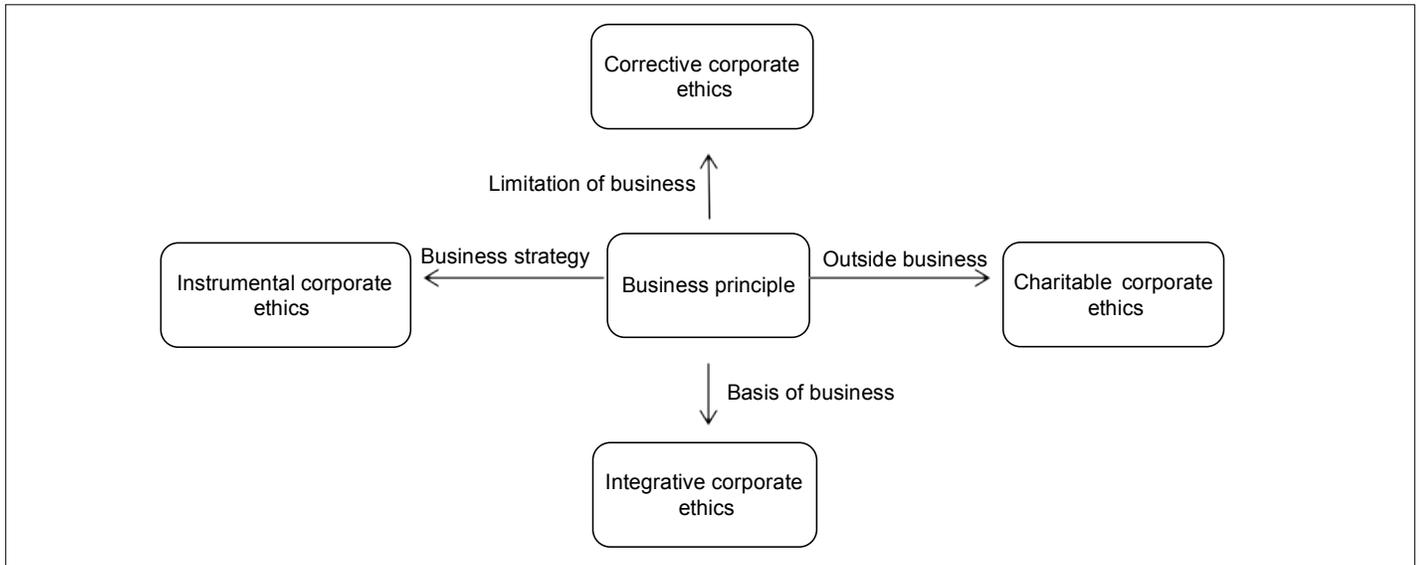
Source: Version of figure by Ulrich (2013, 399), adapted and reprinted with permission.

(for example, the avoidance of large-scale processing of personal data). These terms of service regulate the rights of the users, for example, regarding informational privacy and intellectual property, in a way that does not restrict the marketing activities of the social networks.[5] Such behaviour is problematic because these social networks are thus acting as quasi-governmental regulators (Busch 2013).[6]

Ethics is often combined with the concept of CSR to be understood as the responsibility of commercial entities for their impact on society. Such frameworks encompass not only fundamental rights and additional societal elements, but also objectives of sustainability and overcoming the digital divide (Weber 2013). CSR requires a due diligence process that enables an enterprise to interact with all its stakeholders and with society at large, thereby identifying, preventing and mitigating possible adverse impacts from business operations (Weber 2012).

Twitter attracts Internet users and gains new members by offering participation in a "real-time information network" that supports free speech. The online social network is among others stating that they "believe that the open exchange of information can have a positive global impact."[7] These good intentions should be considered in light of the well-known adage that many successful business people take to heart: "The business of business is business" (Ulrich 2008). Some of the online social network's practices do not seem to coincide with the mentioned CSR principles and so they therefore appear to be ethically problematic. Twitter retains a wide-ranging licence over all content posted via its site and, furthermore, profits from collecting and using its customers' personal information for advertising purposes, a common practice of online social networks. These ethically debatable procedures can be observed in a thorough analysis of Twitter's "About Us" (Busch 2013).

It cannot be overlooked that Twitter and other social networks often seem to awaken an "instrumental CSR" ethos that fails to properly reflect the moral rights, responsibilities and strategic challenges that ICT companies face when interacting with stakeholders. In addition, the regulatory role played by social networks in the online environment makes it difficult to think critically about the actual implications of their role as quasi-regulators for notions of users' rights (ibid.). Simply stated, an important difference exists between the social networks' behaviour on paper and their behaviour in reality.

CORPORATE ETHICS: IMPROVING THE ACCOUNTABILITY PRINCIPLE

The described contractual practices can be measured against various types of corporate ethics. In that regard, Peter Ulrich[8] differentiates between instrumental corporate ethics, charitable corporate ethics, corrective corporate ethics and integrative corporate ethics (Figure 1).

Busch, closely following Ulrich, defines the four types of business ethics slightly differently (Busch 2013, 59–62):

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5   For a general overview see Busch (2013, 56–87).

6   For further details, see the section "Special Problem: Quasi-governmental Function of Social Networks" below.

7   See https://about.twitter.com.

8   For details of the aspects of corporate ethics, see Ulrich (2008, 376–442).

- *Functionalist business ethics* considers commercial ethics a mere function of the market mechanism; maximizing profits and increasing stakeholders' values are ethically sound in themselves (Busch 2013).

- *Instrumental business ethics* addresses ethics as a business tool for making profits in the long run (entrepreneurial success) (ibid.; Ulrich 2008). This more progressive approach is based on the idea that it might pay off later for companies to refrain from ethically questionable business decisions in building trust among its customers (Busch 2013). Without careful consideration of the moral point of view, the only motivators for this behaviour are the prospects for profits in return.

- *Charitable business ethics* aims at obtaining maximum profits as the primary moral duty of the business. The ethical element appears in the way a company spends its money (ibid.; Ulrich 2008). The more profit a company achieves, the more charitable projects it has to support. From a time perspective, this type of ethics is realized after the event has occurred (Ulrich 2008, 402).

- *Integrative business ethics* demands of companies that they involve ethical aspects in business decisions from the beginning (Busch 2013; Ulrich 2008). Ulrich (2008, 409) considers this approach a "permanent process of unconditional critical reflection and the shaping of sound normative foundations for entrepreneurial activity in the service of life."

A comparative analysis shows that Busch replaces Ulrich's term "corporate" with the term "business," which convincingly encompasses a broader definition in the economic environment. In addition, instead of following Ulrich's corrective ethics, which looks at the situative self-limitation of the entrepreneurial pursuit of profit, Busch applies a functionalist approach and goes back to the basics of business behaviour in a market-driven economy. In assessing social networks' policies, however, the slight deviations between the two models are not significant. But the weakness — no matter which definition of business ethics is used — consists of Twitter's partial non-compliance with basic ethical objectives such as justice and equity, care and compassion.

These ethical objectives are not met as a result of the economic rationality of Twitter's business practices. In particular, the elements of integrative ethics are not made fruitful in the practical environment. Normative tensions occur therefore, since the ethical behaviour is operationalized in instrumental ways. Twitter's role as a public, user-centric "platform" on the one hand and as a commercial service on the other should lead to a rights-based approach focusing on issues such as users' privacy and intellectual property rights.

However, as outlined, these rights are substantially restricted in Twitter's terms of service (Busch 2013). In particular, integrative business ethics are not applied as an important ethical discipline. In addition, accountability mechanisms should be substantially improved;[9] the lack of adequate accountability is a weakness in that non-compliance with the stated ethical principles does not have specific consequences. The lesson is that corporate ethics still leaves room for more ethical behaviour patterns.

SPECIAL PROBLEM: QUASI-GOVERNMENTAL FUNCTION OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

Social networks obviously play a role as gatekeepers and intermediaries. They are thereby positioned to apply censorship, both in a positive and in a negative manner. Since existing social networks, so far, have an almost state-like structural role, Rebecca MacKinnon (2012, 149) calls online social networks "sovereigns of cyberspace" and ironically refers to "Facebookistan" and "Googledom" when analyzing these companies' far-reaching power in the present online environment. Furthermore, social network platforms can determine what users are able to do or not do in their respective online territories. As a consequence, Facebook and Google are criticized as being an expression of a "new feudalism" (Busch 2013, 71).

ICT companies and social networks exercise a "quasi-governmental" function on two levels. The first level is in how their core business models (that is, how they make money) have a direct influence on their stakeholders. The second level is in the ways the business models interact indirectly with their stakeholders — for example, by way of technical or legal industry standards, or by shared and agreed-upon business practices within the industry (Busch 2013).

In view of these developments, MacKinnon proposes that online social networks such as Facebook should only be perceived as having implemented acknowledged and legitimate regulations as corporate actors *if* a number of elements are fulfilled. First of all, to be compatible with democracy and human rights, the online social networks' approach to governance must evolve (MacKinnon 2012). Having become the public squares of the Internet, online social networks need to realize and address the reality that they have become de facto political regulators whose legitimacy is constantly questioned and contested.[10] Further, to improve their decision-making processes and gain legitimacy, social networks should engage in unconditional dialogue with their stakeholders, ideally

9   For further details, see Weber (2009a, 152–67).

10   According to MacKinnon (2012, 164), online social networks such as Google Plus or Facebook share a Hobbesian approach to governance by having a social contract with digital sovereigns: Internet users agree to give up some freedoms to the benefit of a sovereign in exchange for getting security and other services.

by taking on concrete roles and a "deliberative corporate policy" (Ulrich 2008, 418).

Given that Facebook, Google and other online social networks depend on the participation of their members, Internet users need to accept their own responsibility as well. To be respected online, they must actively speak out for their rights and create a more citizen-driven information environment (MacKinnon 2012). Accordingly, users need to stop behaving like passive customers and start acting like responsible netizens (citizens of the Internet) (ibid.). In addition, they need to hold companies running social networks accountable for their regulatory decisions (Weber 2009b; Busch 2013). In order to improve transparency, therefore, companies should regularly and systematically inform the public of how gathered information is monitored and under which premises the content gets removed or blocked (MacKinnon 2012). The more netizens actively use their rights, the harder it is for governments and corporations to reduce their freedoms (ibid.).

INTERIM ASSESSMENT

Knowing the importance of acting in compliance with ethical principles, most online social networks at least pretend to agree with the concept of corporate social responsibility. However, some of their practices seem to be ethically problematic, as in, for instance, the common practice of profiting from collecting and using their customers' personal information for advertising purposes. In reality, the social networks do not live up to established ethical principles such as fairness or accountability. Only to a certain extent do they comply with corporate ethics.

In addition, since they are acting as quasi-governmental regulators, online social networks should be obliged to improve their legitimacy by engaging in unconditional dialogue with all concerned stakeholders. Such duty is owed because social networks are particularly expected to comply with behavioural rules since their position reflects an imbalance between them and their customers, deviating from the traditional equal and level understanding of partners in contractual relations.

LESSONS FOR IMPROVING THE ETHICS ENVIRONMENT

The two case studies examined here have shown that ethical issues are not completely neglected in the respective discussions but that practical compliance with theoretical principles does not meet the expectations of the involved stakeholders. To actually improve ethical thinking, the "ethics lite" approach must be overcome. The two chosen examples, representing the macro level and the micro level, respectively, could obviously be complemented by further case studies. Worthwhile research could also encompass

ethical standards for technologists and international organizations, but those discussions exceed the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, the two case studies conducted do allow reasonable lessons to be drawn for improving the ethics environment.

ENSHRINING A FUNDAMENTAL TRUST

Irrespective of its design, a technological system should inspire trust. From an ethical perspective, trust enhances cooperation and fosters reciprocal relations (Pettit 2008). As a consequence, improved ethics for emerging technologies are needed, and Internet applications should be designed in a way that they are considered trustworthy in the eyes of civil society. Therefore, in the Internet governance context, special attention should be paid to data security issues and accountability requirements.

Further, trust is also linked to "reliance." If an individual is relying on something or someone to display a trait or behaviour, then this individual is acting in a way that is shaped by a more or less confident belief in the other party having displayed it (Weber 2015a). Trust is particularly important in the context of cyber threats and cyber security. For example, the building of trust can be improved by better sharing of information or by introducing more appropriate norms of reliance.[11] But reliance and trust also play an important role in a contractual setting. Social networks that do not comply with expected behavioural values breed mistrust in the long run.

Trust should additionally be viewed through the lens of confidence. Any confidential interaction must establish a process of credential exchange. In the dynamic context of the Internet, where interactions are rapidly changing, trust relations must lead to the use of reputation systems, which can contribute to establishing reliability in the virtual world (for example, in social networks) (Pettit 2008). Building trust must also be more strongly addressed within the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) regulatory framework. Many members of civil society do not have sufficient trust in institutional settings; they do not trust corporate bodies to adequately comply with public interest considerations.[12]

The other element critical to building trust, reliance and confidence is accountability — that is, the acknowledgment and assumption of responsibility for actions, decisions and policies within the scope of the designated role. Accountability consists of the obligation of a person to another, according to which the former must give account of, explain and justify his actions or decisions against criteria of the same kind, as well as take responsibility for any fault or damage (Weber 2009b).

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11   For further details, see Bradshaw (2015, 11-12 and 14).

12   See also Taylor (2015, 7–10).

The strict implementation of an adequate accountability regime has a positive impact on trust. The importance of accountability has already been realized in the Internet governance framework. At the ICANN meeting of March 2016 in Marrakesh, the governments agreed to implement general ICANN accountability principles.

REALIZING A KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY

Ethical considerations make it imperative that the information society is developed into a knowledge society. In this context, six aspects need to be considered (Global Ethics Network for Applied Ethics 2013, 12-13).[13]

- *Value-based approach:* Knowledge should be shared fairly, equally, freely, and for the benefit of caring, sustainable communities, thereby respecting the diversity of cultures, languages, religions and economic as well as political systems.

- *People-centred framework:* Technology should not be a goal in itself, but should serve individuals in their personal development.

- *Communities and identities-oriented solutions:* The Internet has a tendency to increase individualism, yet the needs and rights of individuals and of communities should be balanced, particularly since the flood of information leads to constant construction and reconstruction of identities.

- *Education-focused approach:* Information ethics calls for the responsible treatment of information. Education in critical media consumption, including the use of social media, can help stakeholders deal with information.

- *Gender-oriented design:* Somewhat neglected in previous Internet governance declarations (Weber 2015b), gender equality is an important dimension of an inclusive and people-centred society. Ensuring women's parity encompasses access to information, communication, knowledge and decision making.

- *Generation-sensitive framework:* Technological literacy helps to increase participation by all individuals in societal matters and particularly facilitates intergenerational exchange of knowledge.

The improvement of knowledge generation and sharing is mentioned in a good number of Internet governance declarations;[14] however, the substantive contents of these declarations remain relatively vague. The implementation of ethical guidelines as described above could make the framework for a knowledge society more concrete and the realization of the respective objectives more likely. Accordingly, more attention should be paid to issues such as education, multilingualism and cultural diversity (Weber 2015b). An emphasis on knowledge gained and shared can contribute to the ethical objectives of participation and mainly of sharing, leading to strengthened communities and sustainable relationships between human beings.

AVOIDING A DIGITAL AND ACCESS DIVIDE

Ethical standards relate to social justice. Among the many different conceptions, social justice means fair distribution of benefits and burdens, as well as equal opportunities to take advantage of the technological advancements. In addition, social justice can contribute to social integrity and prevent social disparities (Weber 2015a).

A key issue is access to the virtual world. The ideal is avoiding disadvantages and unfairness in accessing knowledge, empowerment and other vital resources for individuals' well-being (ibid.). Virtual networks have become the public space for private communications and business transactions as well as for relations between governments and civil society. Exclusion from this space deprives concerned persons from participation in social and civic life.

The digital divide has been debated for more than 10 years. Beyond overcoming the digital divide, ethics also requires us to prevent the "access divide" to knowledge resources. This means reinforcing free and fair access to knowledge (also for developing countries), supporting open-access repositories (including training and support), developing regional hubs that index open-access repositories, and implementing open publishing initiatives including global visibility, accessibility and values (Global Ethics Network for Applied Ethics 2013). Even though there is evidence that levels of access to the Internet are growing in developed countries (Weber and Menoud 2008), a large part of humankind is still excluded from the Internet.

Overcoming the access divide can also be seen in the context of enhancing democracy and democratic institutions, providing the public with sufficient opportunities for effective public deliberation and participation in democratic processes. Equitable participation of all stakeholders from all regions of the world, while acknowledging the diversity of cultures, will also enable individuals to respond to the ethical challenges of the information society (UNESCO 2013, numbers 3 and 5). Since participation and sharing are key ethical objectives, greater attention to combatting the digital and access divide will improve the ethics environment.

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13   The following text is based on Weber (2015a, 105-106).

14   See "Ethics in Internet Governance" above.

DEVELOPING AN OPEN SOCIETY

Recent technological developments and the growing involvement of civil society in cyberspace are perceived to be leading to the establishment and development of an open society (Weber 2014). In parallel, fundamental ethical values such as inalienable human dignity, basic freedoms, social responsibility and justice also have a global scope (as in McLuhan's vision of the global village, now possible in the electronic metropolis) and can promote public awareness of those principles (Weber 2015a).

The open society concept, as postulated by Karl Popper in 1945, strives to preserve individual freedom as well as the ideal of political-ideological pluralism (Popper 1945). The thinking is that openness and acceptance of other approaches to and solutions for problems would contribute to an environment that would allow the best alternative to establish itself (Weber and Weber 2009). An open society ideally offers space for individuals to access existing choices while reckoning their consequences and taking responsibility for the final outcome of their choices (Jarvie 1999).

An open society also depends on the existence of ethical standards to which members of civil society must comply. The resulting "guidelines" will mainly concern behavioural rules. For example, the ethical objectives of care and compassion are particularly addressed to civil society. So, in this context, civil society has to bear the ethical "burden." In the past, limited attention has been paid to the potential contribution of civil society to the realization of ethics; however, the compliance of civil society members with ethical objectives merits deeper consideration.

In the digital world, public fora allowing exchanges of opinions are available and enable the involvement of participants with different backgrounds and many and diverse ideas (Weber 2014). Given that new possibilities for participation may be developed and previous processes can be improved, a fair chance exists that cyberspace can serve as an apt tool for an open society (ibid.).

CONCLUSION

Although ethics played a certain role in recent years' Internet governance discussions, the subject has never gained substantive attention. A recently published UNESCO study supports this observation. Ethical issues are mentioned mostly in the context of other topics, and detailed discussion of the many facets of ethics is generally lacking. More effort should be invested in the practical realization of ethical principles in Internet governance frameworks.

In view of the growing importance of online social networks and their wide-ranging economic, social and cultural impacts, the public focus should increasingly concentrate on the ethical aspects of Twitter, Facebook, Google and others. Demanding immediate attention are the online social networks' common practice of monetizing customers' personal information for advertising purposes and their quasi-governmental functions.

Online social networks need to "live" ethical behaviour and corporate social responsibility by putting their virtuous-sounding marketing statements into practice. Matching their fine words with reality will improve their reputations and make them more attractive to potential customers. Besides that, further efforts are needed to enable developing countries' access to the Internet, since a large part of the world is still not able to participate online.

Ethics takes the form of behavioural directives stemming from values such as justice and equity, care and compassion, and responsibility. These values need not only formal attention in documents such as international guidelines and frameworks, but also concrete application in daily life. Ongoing discussions about the design and shape of the information society provide a suitable forum to enable a deeper understanding of ethical considerations.

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