

TITLE: The Ethics of the Using New Technology in the context of Modern Problems**CORRESPONDING AUTHOR: Dr. Birgit Biehl**

Research in Germanic and Romance Philology, Islamic and African Studies, Literary scholar and author of poetry and prose. Krefeld/Germany. Pros and Cons of Social Communication Tools and Reflections on the Activities of Interfaith Dialogue Communication.

Abstract. This paper attempts to define ethical standards for global communication within the social media. It is shown that the strong influence of social media not only clashes with governmental control instances but also comes into conflict with the abusive practice of its own users. The next part illustrates the necessity for a globally accepted value canon based on the principle of "dialogue". The acknowledgment of the diversity of cultures is identified as a decisive factor. The final part determines which instances are responsible for implementing these values. Ultimately, the conclusion is reached that it does not suffice to have control over the technical and formal rules of social media, as global dialogue requires a commitment to education and knowledge obtained from a life-long learning process. Only the knowledge of one's own tradition and the familiarity with the conditions of one's own society make it possible to accept others without fear. The situation in 2011 They are still fresh in our memory due to our unrestricted access to the new media: already a small selection of the events that occurred in July and August 2011 shows us the dimension of the problem: violent conflicts in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria or Libya, the assassinations committed by a highly connected single perpetrator from the midst of society in Oslo/Norway, the riots in London: what is the commonality between all these incidents that took place in such different countries? What is the difference between one and the same *YouTube* video depicting a young man fleeing from soldiers when (a) uploaded by his sympathizers in order to encourage the readiness for resistance or (b) uploaded by the authorities as a warning of the consequences a recurrence would entail? One might interpret these incidents as an agglomeration of criminal energy caused by the networking of its participants while another might take them for a heroic mission aimed at liberating the people from the detested authorities. Both these assessments of the same video are based on a specific understanding of societal values, and both assessments effect actions. But which one is the truth? Is there even a single indisputable truth? One party calls for increased governmental control of social networking sites to which another party responds by scathing the element of censorship which, in their opinion, could not impede the movement anyway.

Keywords: ethics, social communication, global communication, value canoa, blogger, interfaith dialogue, social media.

Introduction

In her blog "A Tunisian Girl", a news forum of the Arabian opposition movement, Lina Ben Mhenni, voice of the Tunisian revolution, sent her urgent appeal in June 2011 to all oppressed people of this world, dedicating her message „Network with each other!“, to values such as peace, liberty and

freedom of speech (Ben Mhenni, 2011: 5¹); she thereby defined an unambiguous objective for social networking which involves conditions of freedom and equality for everyone's political commitment

against arbitrariness and oppression (Ben Mhenni, 2011: 8²).

The effects are well-known: networking has led to a strong politicization of affected members of society who are afforded an ever-extending access to the www while it has also contributed to the overcoming of traditional fears towards government authorities and to the implementation of concepts in form of concerted campaigns. The time is ripe for the truth, Ben Mhenni cites like-minded bloggers, ripe for humans to be able to speak freely and be heard from anywhere in the world (Ben

Mhenni, 2011: 25³). As a blogger she knows precisely what to do, says the activist: take pictures, shoot videos, and collect eyewitness accounts in order to expose lies (Ben Mhenni, 2011: 26⁴).

These statements may seem naive, yet their effect is enormous. „I want the world to change“, writes Ben Mhenni. „The only way it will change, however, is when information⁵ is circulated, when the truth is spread. All dictators in the world fear the net.,, (Ben Mhenni, 2011: 44⁵).

According to her, the internet is well suited for a direct, citizen-centric democracy as a part of a world without sovereignty; a world, in which all humans are entitled to equal opportunities regarding the practice of freedom of speech; a world, in which they are allowed unhindered access to information thus

being able to participate in decision-making processes without any restrictions (Ben Mhenni, 2011: 45⁶).

The necessity for global communication about ethical criteria

With her plea for boundless freedom Ben Mhenni has made extreme ethical demands for the use of social media which can be diametrically opposed to the national instances' need for control, control that is used both to ensure order and to provide protection for its citizens. With this perspective in mind the necessity for further reflection about the criteria governing the use of these media becomes obvious. Social media are capable of generating both collective actions initiated by a single person and individual actions caused by the expression of the opinions of many. These actions are driven by an underlying vision of changing the way of life, a vision that considers aspects beyond the personal benefit of the individual. This way social media have become a strong and active social force.

The basic right for freedom of opinion and general access to new media, however, also bears the risk of their destruction. The Tunisian film director Ibrahim Letaief's recent assessment clearly articulates how Ben Mhenni's euphoric aims have turned into disappointment and anger. What happens, if this basic right is actually granted and consequently exercised by all humans? Letaief describes the arduousness of the democratization processes in his country and wonders how the citizens, who are facing an excess of information and opinions, could gain orientation. He laments the fact that the revolution is being engrossed by groups who misleadingly claim merit for the revolution and who use means attractive to the young generation (facebook, for instance) in order to disseminate radical ideas. In Tunisia, he claims, the internet – initially an important resource – has been transformed into a dangerous place, a place for deliberate misinformation. A paradox situation has arisen in which people, who had previously taken to the streets for freedom of opinion, are now debating how to fight the abuse of this freedom on the internet (FAZ, 23.7.2011, Z 1-2).

The consequences of what is called truth, information and appeal have become uncontrollable due to the immediacy of their dissemination. A reassessment of the regulation guidelines is therefore urgently required and needs to be conducted by the individual users of social media, its organizations, national and international supervisory bodies, or supranational institutions such as UNESCO or the Council of Europe. Standards of ethics need to be set that can govern the use of these means in such ways that their abuse becomes minimized, while their positive potential for

international understanding can be utilized in order to help solve social problems to the benefit of humanity.

What is the meaning of ethics in today's new technology?

The term *ethics* requires a real term definition suitable for the advancement of dialogue within the new media. Ethics is decidedly more than simply judicial regulation through professionally or politically authorized instances, more than media-internal etiquette or rules of conduct monitoring statements of authors using fancy names, and also more than the obligatory appeal of the social media's operating companies' attempts to instigate fairness. The concept of ethics is not fully exhausted by the lists of regulations for data protection that constantly require updates, or the protection of minors, copyright issues or any of the other well-known economic risks we have known about ever since the internet was introduced and which are being discussed widely in every country (see, for instance, Council of Europe: 2008 or Dutton, W. H./Dopatka, A./Hills, M./Law, G./Nash, V.: 2011, Deutsche Bischofskonferenz: 201, overview: Schichta /Brosda (eds.):2010). A growing amount of literature dealing with this subject will accumulate each year: one disadvantage of the discussion about these rather formal regulations is the fact that, for most of the time, it can merely react to the outcomes of the technical advancements of social networking. This includes the sophisticated skills of those who know how to use these advancements to the detriment of the citizens, be it for legal, economic or political reasons.

The Doha Conference has committed itself to the interfaith dialogue. A prerequisite for dialogue is the equality of the dialogue partners. Whether or not the respective viewpoints and the resulting attempts to achieve balance and resolution are accepted depends on the recognition of this equality. The aim of mutual understanding can only be realized if there exists a shared vision of a society that is dedicated to the integration of all of its components both on national and international levels. Integration does not mean assimilation to a prevalent defining culture; instead, it refers to an orderly coexistence of different ways of life that do not inflict on each other's cultural and religious identities.

The guiding values of peoples and nations are predominantly affected by their religions and their religions' history, which explains their multifacetedness. People who call for violence are prosecuted in every country. Each form of government, however, has a different definition of extremism. The criteria for this are determined by the values the leading social class of each country identifies itself with. Having said this it becomes clear why certain members of the social media describe the Syrian rebels as liberators, whereas others identify them as terrorists endangering the preservation of political power. As the result of one's knowledge about the countries' historic experiences, their peoples and religions, one has to acknowledge, first of all, that there is no such thing as a single truth in this world. If one does not respect that statement, situations of conflict will inevitably lead to the clash of civilizations and render dialogue impossible. An awareness of the existence of differing viewpoints on life and the world, all of which contain a part of truth without, however, being able to represent one comprehensive truth, is a prerequisite for dialogue. Due to his particular cultural imprint a single human being is unable to achieve that.

The intercultural opening on the internet demands from each individual, who seeks entry, and from each networking social group an enormous effort comparable to that very opening. This effort can reach the limits of self- assurance. For now, our societies still feature too many closed, even hermetically sealed entities. Naturally, each citizen wishes to use the freedom of opinion on the www for his own interests. Freedom, however, does not stand for arbitrariness. Freedom comes with great responsibility. Someone who irresponsibly acts out his freedom declares war on others. If the adversaries are unable to stand their ground the social media degenerate until they become an instrument for political manipulation and ultimately serve as an accomplice to certain lobbyists. In case the adversaries *do* stand their ground, the war will make its way into this medium which features the world-wide understanding of humans in free trade.

Herein lays the basis of ethics as a practical philosophy: it gives instructions on how to evaluate a certain situation in order to facilitate proper actions. Ethical behavior is derived from a conscious outlook onto the values of life and the world. Values change over time and technological developments have affected the shift of entire value systems. Owing to the growing relevance of social networks an increased amount of sensory overload can be observed as people are constantly on the move both mentally and physically. Life is about constant departure,

says Lina Ben Mhenni. The desired participation in the world's rapid coalescing into a global village requires people to open their traditional canon of values in order to reach for a worldwide consensus regarding core values. This results in a decline of both knowledge and awareness of one's own heritage. Historical awareness is a prerequisite for being conscious of one's own values. This type of awareness has developed over a long period of time and stands in contrast with the impression of suspension of time and space one gets from the social media with their synchronized modes of communication.

Constant efforts are necessary in order to embrace both these angles for an ethically informed use of social media. The use of global networking to adjust disadvantages in this world remains a great challenge. Similar to the experience of real life migration which forces states to question their moral concepts – something many people consider a cultural enrichment even though others regard it as a disruption or even destruction of their ancestral habitat – most people gain a desired increase of cosmopolitanism from their affiliation with social media but, at the same time, stand face to face with new and foreign elements which can initiate feelings of fear and insecurity. The user gains self-confidence as long as social networks convey the feeling of security provided by the solidarity of the like-minded. The attempt to curtail the rights of others to the point of appealing for violent enforcement of one's own interests in the new media is based on exactly this type of insecurity and fear. People who have no knowledge of the values of their own group or who are incapable of living those values today, regard the opening of the world as a threat to their own existence and, in lack of any other defense methods, respond with a call for lawbreaking and violence: here, a global medium is used to secure particular interests. The pivotal question is: how can the awareness of individual self-worth be reconciled with the values of an international community in order to develop a value canon applicable to both the real and the virtual world?

What elements constitute this ethics? Where and how can it be realized?

The range of ethics is comprised of three layers: an ethics of religions, which is based on an unalterable order comparable to the status of religious commandments; an ethics of human core values and virtues such as inviolability of human dignity, liberty, and justice, and an ethics of governmental laws, constitutions and procedures aiming to ensure the largest possible amount of happiness for the people. The responsibilities can be determined on all three layers: the family of a person, the religious authorities, the institutions responsible for upbringing and education, the constitutional instances, the cultural diversity within a society, and the personal responsibility of the adolescent. Within this reference field it is important to create conditions for successful understanding by implementing a lifelong learning process at an early stage. This learning process has to pass through the following stages:

Knowledge of the self: from within the family structure and on all layers of academic education one learns about history and tradition of one's own social context. Self-assurance of one's own identity provides strength and makes it possible to regard strangers as an enrichment rather than an enemy who needs to be repelled. A defensive demeanor – due to insecurity – towards every foreign element followed by the desire to violently oust the opponent becomes entirely unnecessary considering the opportunity to resolve the differences in form of a dialogue. This requires a societal commitment towards education as well as thorough pedagogical and professional qualifications on the part of all educators. The future in a networking world can no longer be shaped if the awareness of one's own traditions is lost.

Knowledge of language: it is of vital importance that the conscious use of one's own language is taught from childhood onwards as linguistic functions not only include communication of information but also the expression of numerous connotations, evaluations and all types of misunderstandings. Its abuse by means of devaluation of one's counterpart must be rejected. Generally, an increased attention towards the use of language is required in social media communication, considering that the corrective measures available for face to face communication are absent or insufficiently replaceable. A differentiated and thus confident use of language boosts the ability to handle conflict and consequently enhances the openness for dialogue (Biehl, 2001).

Knowledge of justice and law stands vis-à-vis with that of one's self: acting out one's own interests is restricted by the rules of the community. Adopting a laissez-faire attitude inevitably leads to a right-of-the-mighty- scenario. A sense of vigilance must be developed and the sense of joint responsibility for the protection of the rights of others must be raised.

Knowledge of others: only ego-strength derived from the knowledge of one's rights and those of others makes it possible to truly open oneself to others. It is the responsibility of schools, public and private cultural institutions to ensure that confrontations with foreign elements will not wind up in form of negative surprises. It is possible to convey basic religious and historic concepts in order to understand the reasons for the current behavior of strangers.

Parallel to these learning processes it is necessary to implement an age-appropriate gradual introduction to the technical processes, the ways of communicating and the legal basis that apply to the **social media**. The aim is to achieve a diligent attitude towards the own input and critical vigilance towards the contributions of others, especially when dealing with economic and political subjects. This enables users to avert damages and to alleviate the consequences of imprudent solidarity in the new media.

Organized, tuition-based education represents only one yet highly significant facet in the lives of a generation which is growing up in a globalized world. The practice of actually dealing with all shapes and forms of the unfamiliar gains in importance as it will influence the ways social media will be used.

My approach towards the development of ethical standards for the new media focuses on the strengthening of the disadvantaged, the seducible, and potentially violent lawbreakers. Their descent into anonymity, their social exclusion based on mere punishment of their misdemeanor needs to be prevented in order to avoid further radicalization. This is why the learning process has to commence with them – a task for the next generation! As of now, the public school system mainly offers technical instructions on how to manage social media and issues warnings regarding specific harmful actions. Considering the impact of today's global networking this is not enough.

Conclusion: In addition, responsible entities such as governments, churches and educational institutions need to make a political decision that grants equal status to all social groups and to enable the disadvantaged to participate responsibly in social processes. Only then is there entitlement for the higher authorities to set ethical standards to be obeyed by all citizens. There still is an extensive lack of comprehensive concepts in this realm which are required in order to allow for an informed global dialogue.

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3. „Es gibt keine Hierarchie. Alle können sich am Entscheidungsprozess beteiligen.“
4. „Ich will, dass die Welt sich verändert. Sie wird sich aber nur verändern, wenn die Informationen in Umlauf geraten, wenn die Wahrheit verbreitet wird, Wenn wir uns vernetzen. Sämtliche Diktatoren der Welt fürchten das Netz.“
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