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# Defining Cyberethics

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# Introduction

- Focus in this paper is on on ethical issues closely related to the era of Internet, e.g. cyberethics
- This paper
  - provides a definition of cyberethics from the viewpoint of pragmatic ethics, and
  - discusses certain basic values (democracy, freedom of speech, equity) and proportion these into pragmatic, de facto ideology.
- Resulting comparison will provide following contributions;
  - conceptual analysis on cyberethics and
  - new perspectives on cyberethics research.

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# Background

- Defining the cyberethics is a cross-disciplinary project
- Topic is related to such concepts as internet ethics, self regulation, game theory, plagiarism, trust and privacy, digital divide, professional ethics, surveillance and regulations related to freedom of speech, to name a few

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# Method: Phenomenology

- The crucial question is how cyberethics exists?
- Dynamic process?
  - We are in the middle of the life flow all the time, which means that we are only able to understand the factual reality, in other words we are commuting between two existential categories, the actual projects and the factual reality
  - Things that are changing irregularly all the time can be handled in the same way as Zeno tried to deny the motion
  - In his aporia or paradox about the arrow that never gets to the target Zeno claimed that at any point in time a moving object must be at rest

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# Example: Free communication

- Jürgen Habermas says in his theory of discourse ethics that there is a communicative void in the society. The more people and institutions communicate in a society, the more efficiently democracy is working.
- The Internet should fill this communicative void. This also means that the Internet could be socially valuable, positive value.

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# Example: Commercialism

- In the early days of the Internet there was no commercialism and as little administration as possible. Lee Salter, a Habermas researcher, says that the Internet grows apart all the time from those ideals of free communication which were so typical of it in the beginning. The government uses the Internet more and more for administrative and propagandistic aims, and they are trying to use the Internet as a means to control citizens.

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## Example: Interactivity vs. one-sided communication

- The ideal of Internet communication was interactivity in the beginning, whereas communication has recently become more and more one-sided or non-communicative.

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# Example: Democracy

- Democracy was one of the great ideals in the pioneering times of the Internet.
- Like other positive values it was like an impetus or a driving force that put the Internet's development in motion. But as it is with all the ideals and beautiful values, they do not flourish in reality.

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# Example: Control

- With the assistance of figure and face recognition it is possible to pick up persons from an anonymous mass and build up their virtual identities that has little to do with the real personae.
- Is the effective way of controlling people valuable in one way or the other?
- Of course, if we think of the public administration, bureaucracy and all the overseeing authorities (the police, the customs, security services or tax authorities), the efficient monitoring is a useful phenomenon.
- The question is about the balance between privacy and thrust. The more the public takes over the area of personal privacy, the more the citizens feel anxious and defend against the intrusion.

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# Traditional ethics

- The highest ethical goal of the rational culture and civilization is its spontaneous and self-steered improvement.
- In the same way as a rational individual is able to evaluate and study his practical goals, so can a whole culture.
- European (or western) culture is therefore able to direct its future itself.
- According to Husserl there are ideal absolute goals, as well as ethical, that can never be gained or fulfilled totally, but they are something worth aiming at.
- Here Husserl comes near Immanuel Kant's regulative principle.

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# Pragmatism

- According to pragmatism, values are being tested all the time with reality.
- This is to say that pragmatism does not accept any permanent values, and therefore it is suitable for describing virtual ethics and reality.
- The norms exist in relation to the surroundings, they are context bound. The individual reactions against the value hierarchy can change it.
- Usually development in value hierarchies is slow, but sometimes it is surprisingly fast.

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# De facto ethics in Internet

- There are no significant attempts in creating standards to follow, but instead solutions created by one vendor will quite soon become “de facto standards”. Application is being accepted by general public without being defined and accepted officially, because this would take too much time.
- Similar de facto –practice appears to exist in moral issues related to Internet.

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# Pragmatism and de facto ethics

- Pragmatism is based on de facto ethics, and it easily neglects values like democracy and equality.
- Profit, surplus, effective use of time, logistics, effectiveness, price and usefulness are some of the “values” typical of the de facto pragmatism. But it is not so simple. If pragmatists get an assignment that consists of the development of Internet democracy, they certainly accomplish it, without thinking of the meaning of the word democracy.
- According to Husserl, the civilization is in crisis when the pragmatic science dominates. To solve this crisis Husserl invites rational thinking.

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# Self-regulation as pragmatism

- Concrete example of pragmatic approach is the Safer Internet plus programme
- Program aims at promoting safer use of the Internet and new online technologies, particularly for children, and at fighting against illegal contents and contents unwanted by the end-user, as part of a coherent approach by the European Union.

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# Goals of Safer internet plus program

- To improve the functionality of Internet
- To provide safer and sound environment for children
- What ethical values are emphasized?
- What is the relation between functionality (pragmatic) and "appropriate" content (universal ethics)?

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# Conclusions

- De facto ethics and pragmatism don't operate on the same level with traditional ethics or ethical code.
- There are no distinct and unquestionable principles in pragmatism; efficiency, usability and fastness can be seen as one of the main criteria to the activity of good quality (valuable).
- It might be so that sometimes it would be useful to study the ethical foundations of all the activities in a society.
- Husserl's ideas bring ethical content to the non-ethical environments.

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# Conclusions

- De facto ethics makes it possible to describe the factual ethical situation in the Internet; traditional ethics tells us how it should or could be.
- If we give priority to values like freedom, democracy and equality, there is certainly a big difference between the factual situation and the absolute ideas (ideals, natural values, as described in traditional ethics).
- The problem in this kind of evaluation is the definition of the absolute values which is important in quantitative research and is called operationalisation: in ethics it is extremely difficult to answer the question “How do I measure what I am interested in studying?”.

Questions?

Thank you for your  
attention!