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**THEORIZING ON ROLE OF EDUCATION IN DEVELOPING SOCIAL NETWORKING (SN) ETHICS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Social Networking (SN) gives freedom to socialize, report, create, choose, and share user-generated content and news. SN has become subject of researches in social sciences, however the current status of researches involving education and SN is largely one way serving educational interests and there is negligence of the role of education in developing SN ethics. As a result, SN ethics has not yet developed as a discipline or a field of study in its own right and in spite of many moral issue that have emerged from it. There is an unbreakable relation between SN and ethics. The social media aspect of SN, the socializing character of SN, and human centric nature of SN are difficult to be thought of without having an ethical framework. On the other hand, there is a role for ethics-based psychology in SN and it demands an ethical principle of freedom of speech. Due to complexities of SN ethics, it seems that its basis and foundation should be on social ethics; however, the technological nature and specific moral issues emerging from SN deserve to be addressed. And this in turn calls for responsibility of educational institutions to include SN ethics as part of social ethics.

**Key Words:** Social Networking, Ethics, Education, Sociology.

**INTRODUCTION**

Most of the forms of mass media are one way or another controlled, manipulated, goal oriented with stipulated objectives and unspecified agendas under various forms of power and influences, nevertheless social networking (SN) exceptionally remains essentially free of these influences. However, there are concerns about the users as agents and the technical architecture of SN sites. In social networking the users can engage in online socializing, create and maintain interpersonal relationships, report events as news, publish and broadcast their opinions, and disseminate information, news, and reports that may have come to them from their favorite, reliable, and trustworthy sources. This gives freedom to socialize, report, create, choose, and share.

Due to the abovementioned nature of SN, various aspects of SN have become subjects of research in information technology and a few subject areas of social sciences. Among these research areas is the nature of relationship between education and SN and in this regard most of the literature and researches are written on the themes such as how SN could be used in imparting education and learning. However, a survey of researches and literature review would show that the role of education in SN has been to a greater degree neglected. How education and educational institutions can contribute in forming and shaping learners to be part of SN as

responsible human beings with understanding and awareness of the fact that by SN they are not just interacting with technology but with real persons on the other end is in need of consideration of educators and serious attention by educational institutions. The researchers of *Social Networking: Boundaries and Limits Part 1: Ethics* published in *TECH TRENDS* rightly make a thoughtful observation by reporting that “In our search for ethical guidelines for using social networking, we were surprised to find that few such resources exist” (2014, p. 28). Along with having a broad understanding of being humane, being aware of social values, cultural diversities, and human dignity and rights, the education and pedagogy should impart SN ethics as the explicit or implicit component of teaching and learning. Therefore, just like training and disciplining at school level, and professional ethics and various subjects of applied ethics taught at higher educational institutions, there is a need of introducing social networking ethics in the educational institutions as part of curriculum and syllabus. The practical issues, their moral values, related to SN could be attempted by ethics, because our practical choices are deep-rooted in ethics: one of the cardinal philosophical subject under which the development of social, political, and legal philosophy has been hitherto.

In addition to the abovementioned negligence, SN ethics has not yet developed as a discipline or a field of study in its own right. On the other hand, the less maturity of the users has caused the misuse of SN and has thus given birth to many SN related moral issues. However, the online society of which we have become members and even citizens in many ways demands an ethical space and environment in which normal and healthy participation should take place. And it demands that the participants should be aware about SN ethics and that may create a sense of discipline in them.

### **Scope of Social Networking Ethics**

Social networking is a very observable phenomenon. It is not an abstract idea but a concrete reality that is part of our social life. The subject of social networking does require attention of intellectuals from various domains of knowledge and wisdom including philosophy and social sciences. There is an unbreakable relation between SN and its aspects and functions with ethics. The social media side of SN, the socializing character of SN, and human centric nature of SN cannot be thought of without having an ethical framework.

SN is used as a form of media: the social media. It plays a large role in information reporting, creation, sharing, and communication. This makes social networking distinct and different from other means of traditional media. The information sharing lifts SN above the prejudice that is part of traditional media, which is at times censored, controlled by governments, serving vested interests of various stakeholders from politics to corporate. On the other hand, user-generated content and sharing and posting news and reports that are not covered by traditional media puts traditional media and SN on intersections, it fulfills the gaps left out by traditional media by non-reporting or avoiding reporting certain events for many reasons and gives opportunity to users to fill the left out gaps by their efforts, interests, and creativity. Given this aspect of SN as media, it demands certain ethical framework within which such role of SN could be envisioned.

The socializing aspect of SN provides a special technical mode for both information sharing and communication. This component of socializing is and should be central to SN because SN has replaced to a large extent our social interactions. The aspect of “socializing” demands ethical framework. There is a distinction between computer networking and SN. The main element that makes them different is that in SN the human element is central and around this human element a healthy SN should be built. Therefore, SN is not technology centered but human centered. It is human centric and not technology centric. The human centric reality of SN touches human psychology. There is a role of ethics in human psychology and most of it is in direct relationship with human behavior and attitude. A psychologically healthy person is expected to act, respond, and decide, as a responsible person in accordance to ethical and right attitude. In this way psychology and ethics go hand in hand in tackling SN ethical issues.

### Human Psychology and SN Ethics

The main element of SN is interrelationship between human beings and their interactions and responses. And a human being is not without psychological makeup. Any debate about SN cannot ignore human psychology and this aspect of SN has received to a large extent attention of researchers. In human interaction the psychology plays its role so it has role in SN. The psychology is a shared domain in which participants engage. Results of *Social networking sites: An adjunctive treatment modality for psychological problems. Indian journal of psychological medicine* shows that

Facebook was the most popular sites and used to seek emotional support on the basis of the frequent updates of emotional content that users put in their profile; reconciliations, escape from the problems or to manage the loneliness; getting information about illness and its treatment and interaction with experts and also manifested as problematic use. (Menon, I. S., Sharma, M. K., Chandra, P. S., &Thennarasu, K., p.260).

The SN provides a space for human psychological environment emerging from the human attitude and behavior. And having a sound attitude and right behavior has basis in ethics. Maintaining a healthy psychological environment of SN is not possible without ethics. Even psychologists have to pay attention to it as Lannin, D. G., & Scott, N. A. (2013) report that:

Emerging trends online, and especially in social network sites, may be creating an environment for psychologists where transparency is increasingly unavoidable. Thus, most psychological practitioners may now have to engage in *small world ethics*—ethical acuity that requires an application of ethical principles to the increasingly interconnected and transparent world that is burgeoning from online culture. (Lannin, D. G., & Scott, N. A. (2013), p.135)

A good example of how ethics and psychology are related is vividly present in virtue ethics which is “agent centered” and ‘character based”. The agent centeredness of virtue ethics is aimed at feelings, reasoning, consciousness, mind, behavior, attitude, and ultimately action. It is about human flourishing.

Given the human centric aspect of SN and the importance of human psychology, SN is in need of an ethical principle of freedom of speech.

### **SN Principle of Freedom of Speech**

The relationship between SN and human psychology leads to the ethical responsibility of the users while engaging with SN. It is because SN and psychology are interdependent in the realm of human socializing. The main elements of SN such as communication and generating content is basically connected with the freedom of speech. Freedom of speech by its nature is an ethical issue. The most celebrated principle on freedom of speech is John Stuart Mill's harm principle. A person is free to speak as long as it does not harm anyone. The further enhancement of the principle is Joel Feinbegr's offense principle: offending others is not less than harm. Both these principles are relevant to SN generally. However, the principle which ought to be given preference in communication and generating content should be a healing principle. It is because of the complexity of SN. Human beings in social settings are not just in need of information that is based on no harm or no offense principle, though these principles are relevant; in addition to that, SN needs a healing principle because it is the need of human beings for various reasons. And it is what human beings expect in social interactions and settings. In short, the healing principle is what could be expected from a sympathetic social being who believes and acts in accordance to the Golden Rule that states to treat others as you wish to be treated while interacting with a fellow human being.

The above mentioned brief discourse which started with delineating the scope of the SN ethics showing mainly the human centric nature of SN and further deliberated on the fact that how psychology grounded in ethics crucially becomes important and finally considering an appropriate ethical principle of speech for SN ethics leads to the question: with all these complexities, what should be then the basis and foundation of SN ethical framework.

### **Basis and Foundation of SN Ethical Framework**

What could be the basis and foundation of SN ethical framework? Is there any special ethical information infrastructure on which SN could be based or founded? There is not. Yet there are human ethical social situations which could make a firm foundation for SN ethics. In a theoretical sense an ethical human society is the foundation of SN ethics. The sense of being part of such society while engaging with SN transforms a participant from "technology connectedness" to "human connectedness". Health, improvement, and progress of SN is based on the richness and level of social ethical qualities in a society. In other words, SN ethics reflects the real life social ethics. This theoretical assumption is backed by social science research as well. For example, the results of the research *Adolescent peer relationships and behavior problems predict young adults' communication on social networking websites* show that "Findings are consistent with developmental theory asserting that youths display cross-situational continuity in their social behaviors and suggest that the conceptualization of continuity may be extended into the online domain." (Mikami, A. Y., Szwedo, D. E., Allen, J. P., Evans, M. A., & Hare, A. L. (2010), p. 46). Furthermore, in *Building social networks ethics beyond "privacy": a sociological perspective*, the authors conclude that "boundaries between

online and offline world are becoming increasingly porous and we argue, although acknowledging certain particular characteristics of SNS, that SNS ethics should be less about the specificities of online behaviors than on their articulation with the social world.”(Coll, S., Glassey, O., &Balleys, C. (2011)). They further add that

Online and offline activities should be symmetrically analysed... such method would retain as its main object how social norms are translated from one world to the other and how those norms co-evolve notably through well known social processes. (Coll, S., Glassey, O., &Balleys, C. (2011P.50).

Though the basis and foundations of SN ethics could be founded on social ethics, yet SN environment and its ethical nature is in certain ways different from social ethics and this difference demands enhancement of social ethics by incorporating SN ethical dimensions as being part of training and courses.

### **Difference between SN Environment and offline Social Situations**

SN environment has its own special nature which demands more than what social relationships demand and on the other hand SN has given birth to novel moral issues which need to be addressed apart from issues of ordinary social ethics. The way SN is different than ordinary socializing is that “When a computer network connects people or organizations, it is a social network. Just as a computer network is a set of machines connected by a set of cables, a social network is a set of people (or organizations or other social entities) connected by a set of social relationships, such as friendship, coworking or information exchange”.(Marturano, A, 2011)This nature of SN is a combination of both technology and human beings. Therefore, SN is more than being established on real human socializing. Because “technology mediates (or transforms) the meaning of what it carries, and hence that technologies as well as humans have a moral character that can be opened up to scrutiny” (Light, B., & McGrath, K, 2010)Consequently, there are special and unique feature sof SN which are in need of consideration, among these features are: anonymous identity, loss of human sensitivity by distance, neglecting plural human psychology, being indifferent to space and time, and not being always able to respond to the questions and comments of the recipients.

On the other hand with the advent of SN, new moral issues have appeared which are not addressed by ordinary social ethics. These moral issues include spamming, data theft, unauthorized access, trolling, cyber bullying, etc.

The above-mentioned technical and moral aspects make SN different from real life ordinary socializing and interactions. In addition to ethics for real life socializing, there is a need for improving social skills of people for their online behavior and it could be inculcated by means of character education.

### **CONCLUSION**

In the light of the above discourse, it seems that SN cannot do away with ethics and such ethics is part of social life which could be transformed into SN ethics. Furthermore, given the complexities of SN and the emerging various moral issues from it are in need to be addressed adequately. And in doing so, educational institutions should play their role in making it possible. Without analyzing some or many ethical problems in light of various ethical theories which is beyond the scope of this paper, I believe a teaching and learning experience of SN ethics can be fruitful and result oriented.

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