

DIGNITY AND THE INTERNET: A STUDY OF YOUNG PEOPLE’S RESPONSE

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Abstract

The use of computers and the internet has undoubtedly many positive influences in our daily life, ranging from the way of gathering information, to communication, education, entertainment, access to public services, shopping, etc, offering an extended democratic way of accessing information for everyone on the global scale. But the internet poses also a threat, since it gives also the possibility to be accessed by people who use this open means for disturbing, or offensive purposes. In this study we will give the first results of a major research on dignity and the internet.

1. Introduction

The use of communication technology, such as cell phones, personal computers and the internet enables access to information, collaboration, interaction, research possibilities and communication for every person on the global scale. However, these technologies and the open access to everybody, pose also a threat, since it can also be used to for bullying, harassment, racial and ethnic slurs, threats and slander, “spamming”, “spoofing” or humiliation of others [1]. A viable alternative would be the development of procedures and policies that can both empower and educate the young people to develop safeguards, self-awareness and self-responsibility for their protection. Also the creation of green-spaces, the effective

labelling of content and the development of new domains would also help in this direction that is, create beneficial and safe environments. In 1996 the Committee of Civil Freedom, Justice and Internal Affairs of European Council decided to adopt the recommendation concerning the development of a European net of information and education regarding the safer use of the Internet. It resulted to the establishment of a four-year (2005–2008) European project on the projection of safer internet use (Safer Internet Plus) aiming: 1) fighting the illegal content, 2) facing of the unwanted and harmful content (including spamming), 3) promotion of a safer environment and sensitizing of the public opinion [2].

Knowing the danger especially young people are exposed to from information and communication media many states have enacted legislation regulating their protection, as for example the Interstate Treaty on the Protection of Human Dignity and the Protection of Minors in Broadcasting and in Telemedia, which provides consistent protection of children and adolescents against content in electronic information and communication media which impairs or harms their development or education, and for the protection against content in electronic information and communication media which violate human dignity or other legal goods protected under the German Criminal Code [3].

The words dignity has widely varying meanings and connotations, differing across time, languages, and cultures. Notions of rights and human dignity have been examined for centuries in great depth by ethicists and other philosophers and by religious thinkers, and more recently by social scientists and, as related to information, by information scientists. Rights and dignity are the foundation for many philosophical concepts and religious beliefs and for Information Ethics, and this foundation affirms the notion that each individual has basic rights and is deserving of respect and the preservation of human dignity. In its Article 1, the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights also states [4]:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

The World Summit on the Information Society [5] used the above Declaration of Human Rights as a foundation in their international discussions to shape their common vision of the Information Society:

... to build a people-centered, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life... .

The Declaration also states:

... reaffirm the universality indivisibility, interdependence and interrelation of all human rights and fundamental freedoms. ... also reaffirm that democracy sustainable development, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms as well as good governance at all levels are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

In reviewing these statements, several points of focus emerge: 1) the emphasis on the Fundamental Moral Experience and the concepts of freedom, equality, dignity and rights; 2) the critical need for compassion and the spirit of brotherhood; and 3) the importance of a people-centered society with the key role throughout entire life-cycle of information to empower individuals to achieve their full potential and improve the quality of their lives [6]. Such issues cannot simply be ignored by modern education, but should be understood and appreciated as pupils' and students' equipment in becoming informed and conscious citizens in the society in which they will live in.

Evelin Lindner, Linda Hartling and Uli Spalthoff use the notion of *equality in dignity* for all humans in order to achieve dignity on a global scale [7].

In this study we present the first results of a major investigation on how young people experience and what opinion they have on communication media and the internet.

2. Method

We wanted to get an insight into pupils and students opinions on the possible threat of the internet and their experience from the use of it. To get a first response from the young people we prepared a questionnaire on dignity and technology covering technological devices and means which are daily used by young people, such as the cell phone, the computer, and the internet.

The questionnaire comprises of questions on how secondary school pupils and university students understand dignity, on their use of the cell phone, the computer and the internet, and on which of the previously mentioned means could, in their opinion, mostly pose a threat on their dignity. In order to understand the results in a deeper level we will conduct interviews, in focus groups and personal, so these are the first results of an ongoing research project.

The questionnaire was completed by secondary school students, in order to observe the response of teenagers, physics students, who are mainly considered having a scientific and technological background, and by theology students, who have a more theoretical background and could be more sensitive to matters of ethics and dignity. The ages of the participants were between 16 and 24 years.

3. Results

From general questions on dignity in everyday communication with others, we found that young people have a high sense of dignity and self-respect. They find it highly offending when adults, such as teachers, parents, and even strangers, talk to them in a bad way, while they are more likely to tolerate a bad behavior from their friends, as mainly stated by the secondary school students. Theology students show a lower tolerance of bad behavior.

Most of students use cell phones, to talk or send SMSs a lot, while only a few students use them to navigate the internet. In addition, many mention that they use their cell phones to listen to music, take pictures and videos, and less to play games. The results are about the same for every group.

Most students also use a PC and the internet very much or much on a daily basis. They state to play internet based games frequently, as well as to play games on their PC. Furthermore, PCs are used for entertainment, such as watching movies, and TV shows and listen to music, but young people also use a PC and the internet to gather information on tasks and assessments on a very high percentage, or to access the news, but in a lower percentage. Again, similar behavior could be found for all target groups.

Analyzing the questions connecting mobile phones or the internet to cases where young people experienced or could experience hostile messages or flaming, offenses or outrages, most secondary school pupils were more concerned about incoming calls or SMSs and less about MMSs. Most of them thought that e-mail messages are not a problem, since a small percentage thought of this means as possibly offensive. On the other side, social networks, blogs or chat rooms are considered far less a possible threat to the youngest peoples' dignity. Examining the two students groups, a clear shift towards acknowledging all electronic communication means as being a possible threat, could be observed by the theology students in comparison to the physics students group.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Although young people have a high sense of respect and concerns in regard with matters of dignity in their real life, when they use communication technology and the internet, they consider threats far less dangerous for their dignity than real life events. Maybe the distance of the offender, through the technological medium, or the experience of something virtual as in the internet might lower their tolerance to offending acts to their dignity. As expected, the youngest group of the secondary school students exhibited the lowest awareness of the dangers and threats they might experience, while the theology students had a much clearer insight of the possible dangers.

The results presented need to be augmented with interviews, a research which is underway. Every person must be respected in their real life and also through communication technologies. Young people have to be educated to demand a respect of their dignity also in electronic communications and on the internet. If the humans intend to live in a culture of peace, it is essential for all people to reaffirm each other's value and dignity as equal human beings, seeing each other as diverse, but complementary parts of humankind.

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