

Introduction

The arrival of social networking technologies such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and YouTube is altering the fabric of our lives and changing the ethical implications of our social and political practices. Social media is at the center of many of our greatest public policy debates, but the role it plays in relation to human behavior is far from settled. Consider the shooting attack on Republicans at a baseball field during a charity event. The gunman was described “as a Bernie Sanders supporter and campaign volunteer virulently opposed to President Trump. He posted many anti-Trump messages on social media, including one in March that said ‘Time to Destroy Trump & Co.’” (Board, 2017). A look at his Facebook posts confirmed the antipathy James T. Hodgkinson had for President Trump and the Republican Party. The question *not* clearly answered, however, was whether social media contributed to his intentions to shoot Republicans. And in the 2016 elections, Hillary Clinton placed some responsibility for her loss on the social media network Facebook. According to Clinton, the “fake stories” that spread on social media influenced the voters in the election. The solution she suggested? Content regulation by the social media giant. She said of Facebook, “They’ve got to get back to trying to curate it more effectively, they’ve got to help prevent fake news from creating a new reality” (Staff, 2017). In response, Facebook and Google began shutting down “fake news” sites, but without a clear understanding of how or why these social media sources played a role in swaying the American voter and without a clear path to avoid the potential regulatory pitfalls that come along with content regulation. Social media and its potentially radicalizing effect also figures into our domestic and international efforts against the threat of terrorism. The Obama administration

justified the drone strike on American citizen Anwar al-Awlaki, in part because of the radicalizing influence of al-Awlaki's blogs, Facebook page, YouTube videos, and contributions to the online al-Qaeda magazine, *Inspire*. Even after his death, the Congress believed the influence of social media was so powerful that it had to be taken down to prevent further terrorist acts. A *New York Times* article affirmed this view, suggesting that al-Awlaki's public statements and videos continued to inspire acts of terrorism in the wake of his assassination (Shane, 2015). Still, the assertion that social media *is* a source of influence in radicalization does not answer the question of *why* its influence might be so powerful. Last, but certainly not least, social media is at the center of heart-wrenching circumstances of individuals such as Amanda Todd. Amanda was a young girl who, like many others her age, found an anonymous friend online. After gaining her confidence, this online "friend" convinced her to send a topless picture to him. When the picture went viral, Amanda was bullied and teased to such an extent she was forced to change schools. As the abuse continued, Amanda became more and more despondent and could find no way out of the situation except to commit suicide. Before her death, she made a disturbing YouTube video about cyber bullying that went viral. While many people were shocked and dismayed by what she had experienced, others went on the attack even after her death, suggesting she deserved what had happened to her.

The growing occurrence of diverse incidents such as those described assert a connection with social media, but understanding the reasons for its influence or methods of countering it are far from settled. This is because the approach to the moral problems we encounter in our use of social networking technologies is founded on familiar fault lines that continue to limit our inquiry. The potential mediating effects of social media on *us*, the choices we make, and the actions we take is not fully interrogated because, despite the disagreement about the ethical concerns of social networking technologies for society, there is one assumption that has been generally accepted by those engaged in the debate: social networking technologies lack moral significance.

The moral significance of technologies generally – not only social networking technologies – is difficult to explore because technologies are typically considered objects and we are human, and the province of morality has long been ours. We viewed technology as only a tool capable of freeing us from our human limits, providing us with an increased ease in communication, commerce, or transportation. With this view in mind, we have addressed the morality of our machines, working to limit their

detrimental effects on the existence of humanity to ensure our morality is not destroyed. We have developed disciplines to address our ethical concerns, such as bioethics, nanoethics, cyberethics, and hackerethics, to guarantee that technology is under our moral direction and control. Not surprisingly, the narrative about social networking technologies and the types of human interactions they engender is focused on how *we* employ the technologies and the moral consequences *we* cause rather than the moral significance of the technology on our existence, experience, and perception. These technologies are at one and the same time portrayed as a threat to our privacy and anonymity and protective of them; essential and destructive of our interpersonal relationships; and simultaneously constructive of a global civil society and debilitating to it. Social media is often intimately connected to the expansion of our freedom and liberty in cyberspace just as often as they are designated threats, as reports of surveillance, data mining, and information sharing continue to escalate. Those like Gabriella Coleman defend a broad range of human activities on the Internet— even those considered harmful by many — as morally and politically consistent with a Western tradition of freedom of expression and protest, no matter how damaging or offensive the consequences. She wrote:

A decade-plus of anthropological fieldwork among hackers and like-minded geeks has led me to the firm conviction that these people are building one of the most vibrant civil liberties movements we've ever seen. It is a culture committed to freeing information, insisting on privacy, and fighting censorship, which in turn propels wide-ranging political activity. In the last year alone, hackers have been behind some of the most powerful political currents out there (Coleman, 2013).

Others focus on the harmful human behavior behind the technology. Citron, for example, points to the fact that the “Internet has contributed to the rise of bigoted mobs. People are more inclined to join antisocial groups when they do not have to disclose their identities” (Citron, 2014, p. 62).

The present work provides a new perspective by offering a new approach for conceptualizing the moral significance of social networking technologies and so that we can develop a new trajectory for future research. The central premise is that mediation of social networking technologies possesses phenomenological effects significant to the actions we take and the decisions we make in a morally significant way. The phenomenological effects are of no small consequence, raising questions about how and under what circumstances we are shaped by social media,

which ultimately changes the perspective we take on moral responsibility for online behavior and challenges our current approach to regulation and technological development. At a time when our communications, interactions, and transactions increasingly rely upon the medium of technology, it is essential to begin to understand whether and in what ways our technological tools might affect our own sensibilities about morality.

Consideration of the moral significance of technological artifacts requires defining an alternative to the modernist subject–object dichotomy upon which our relationship with technology has long been premised. This does not necessitate attributing animism to technology, but instead requires us to evaluate how and under what conditions and to what effect technology mediates the reality we encounter online. Although technology lacks consciousness, rationality, freedom, and intentionality, it does not follow that technology does not have an important moral dimension in influencing “human actions and experiences” and shaping our moral choices even in the most innocuous ways (Verbeek, 2011).

Instead of a classical phenomenologist account that seeks to describe preexisting subjects and objects, a postphenomenological viewpoint, like that taken here, analyzes technology as constructive of human behavior and engages a more contextualized approach to technology through which subjectivity and objectivity are constituted (Ihde, 1993). To evaluate the mediating effect of communication technologies on our perception of reality, it is necessary to view the relationship not as unidirectional, but instead as one in which technology acts upon us as we act with it. As Verbeek explains, “technological artifacts are not neutral intermediaries but actively co-shape people’s being in the world: their perceptions and actions, experience and existence” (Verbeek, 2011, p. 8). Technologies mediate not only our perceptions, but also our praxis, introducing a novel set of considerations to the question of means, ends, and morality that has animated the study of technology and its effect on our lives. The chapters that follow provide a foundation for rethinking the moral significance of social networking technologies with the intention of establishing the basis for reconsidering the technological influences on our own morality.

Methodological Approach

Chapter 1 considers how and under what circumstances the political significance of communication technologies has so far dominated our ethical concerns associated with social networking technologies. While

the political significance of communication technologies in general is obvious, this singular approach clouds our ability to engage in alternative methodological inquiries. Coming to terms with the moral significance of technologies has been difficult to explore primarily because these same technologies are at the center of existing cultural, political, and social debates that draw our attention to the political rather than moral significance of communication technologies.

The political significance of any given technology is found in the social and material conditions necessary for the operating environment of the system and in the social and political relationships constructed around it. As Winner explains, “if we examine social patterns that characterize the environment of technical systems, we find certain devices and systems almost invariably linked to specific ways of organizing power and authority” (Winner, 1986, p. 33). Some of these social and political patterns are longstanding. The practice of coupling technology and the power of the state occurred as far back as Plato: “a pivotal theme in the *Republic* is Plato’s quest to borrow the authority of *techne* and employ it by analogy to buttress his argument in favor of authority in the state” (Winner, 1986, p. 30). Decoupling technology from its political significance, however, is not a simple matter because it is often intricately intertwined with patterns of social and political authority vested in it which, in turn, influences our understanding and praxis. Likely, we may not even recognize the entrenched ways in which we attach political significance, taking it to be part and parcel of the technology rather than something that is constructed around it:

Histories of architecture, city planning, and public works contain many examples of physical arrangements with explicit or implicit political purposes. One can point to Baron Haussmann’s broad Parisian thoroughfares, engineered at Louis Napoleon’s direction to prevent any recurrence of street fighting of the kind that took place during the revolution of 1848. (Winner, 1989, p. 24).

Early communication technologies such as the telephone, for example, served existing patterns of political authority by providing new tools to law enforcement to ferret out illegal activity during the Prohibition era and to investigate allegations of espionage during both of the Red Scares. The political significance of communication technologies was not only a matter of state authority. The same technology also enabled new societal patterns of associational life that evoked the political significance of First Amendment freedoms and Fourth Amendment privacy protections. Modern social networking technologies evidence some of the same forms

of political significance attributed to the telephone, but the arrival of Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram also introduced new patterns of social and political authority as the private sector increasingly plays an important role in the information revolution. Communication companies and Internet service providers develop a never-ending supply of social networking platforms and apps for the anxious consumer, who willingly trades his or her data for access, leading to information harvesting and mining for the benefit of the private sector, but also for the public sector as incidences of clandestine information sharing with the government are uncovered. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of California, for example, recently discovered that Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram provided user data access to Geofeedia, a developer of a social media monitoring technology put to use by law enforcement to track protesters and their associational networks. Individuals, however, are not entirely powerless in this new information economy and are creating their own solutions for protecting their privacy and associational rights by ironically using the very same technological tools to obfuscate identity and communicate anonymously. Anonymous communication technologies, including such things as web-based redirectors, protocol dependent proxies, and Tor or virtual private network (VPN) tunneling are increasingly used as a technological panacea to the erosion of privacy on the Internet. By some accounts, there has been a sixfold increase in the demand for VPNs, especially in light of the rollback of congressional protections for privacy. This trend continues despite the fact that the privacy protections gained are not always as protective as they are represented (Silverman, 2017).

While social networking technologies are rightly viewed through the prism of the past because they are vested with some of the same political significance of their antecedents, our present and future relationship with these technologies should not be limited to only this perspective. The focus on the political significance of the past for understanding social networking technologies of the present is not necessarily incorrect, but it does have the parallel effect of diminishing our consideration of the moral significance of these more modern forms of communication technologies. To pave the way for a newly conceived approach to social networking technologies, the old must be reconsidered, and this first chapter is intended to set the stage for a reconsideration of the moral significance of social networking technologies.

Chapter 2 develops a theoretical approach for evaluating the moral significance of our new forms of communication technologies. Works such as Latour and Woolgar's *Laboratory Life* (1986) or Michael Lynch's *Art*

and Artifact in Laboratory Science (1985) establish the basic assumptions of the approach taken here, which is built on the premise that technology cannot be isolated from methods, interests, materials, and institutions influencing its constitution; rather, technology is an artifact arising from the complex interaction of these processes and interests and should not be separated from the intentionality of users, policy, methods of adaptation, and existing institutional practices that influence its constitution. The first step in constructing a framework to understand the mediating influences of technology on our experience, perception, and existence is to dismantle the modernist subject–object dichotomy upon which our relationship with technology has long been premised. This process formally begins with a consideration of Heidegger, who establishes a philosophical basis for understanding the relationship between human beings and their technological tools as something more complex than subject–object dichotomy. In his essay on *The Question of Technology*, he warns that an instrumental conception of technology is a limitation on our understanding of technology’s essence. Heidegger explains his reasoning:

We are delivered over to it in the worse possible way when we regard it as something neutral; for this conception of it, to which, today we are particularly likely to do homage, makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology (Heidegger, 1977, p. 288).

Heidegger suggests our relationship with technology is one that orders our understanding of reality and, in doing so, also influences our relationship with Nature and our own sense of Being. Heidegger sets aside the usual starting point of the subject–object dichotomy and instead assumes technology influences our perceived reality, which is continually revealed as we investigate and observe with the use of technology. Heidegger’s insights provide the basis for a phenomenological approach to the study of technology in the tradition of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, both of whom advocate on behalf of research that “analyzes the relations between human beings and their world rather than a method of describing reality” (Verbeek, 2011, p. 15). These insights are taken one step further in a postphenomenological approach to technology. Not only is reality influenced by the lens of technology, but so too is humankind changed in our day-to-day use of technology. According to this viewpoint, technology is not a mere tool but is also a medium through which subjective perceptual experience is created and mediated, which, as will be discussed, possesses consequences for our moral sensibilities. As Don Ihde describes, whether by a process of embodiment, hermeneutics, or

alterity, technology can transform our experience of reality and affect our existence in the process. The postphenomenological explanation of our relationship with technology is built on the premise that it is transformative of our perceptions, existence, and experience:

From a hermeneutical perspective, artifacts mediate human experience by transforming perceptions and interpretive frameworks, helping to shape the way in which human beings encounter reality. The structure of this kind of mediation involves amplification and reduction; some interpretive possibilities are strengthened while others are weakened. From an existential perspective, artifacts mediate human existence by giving concrete shape to their behavior and the social contexts of their existence. This kind of mediation can be described in terms of translation, whose structure involves invitation and inhibition; some forms of involvement are fostered while others are discouraged. Both kinds of mediation, taken together, describe how artifacts help shape how humans can be present in the world and how the world can be present for them (Verbeek, 2005, p. 196).

The current research suggests the mediating effect of technology also requires rethinking our basic assumptions about the autonomy of the moral subject in any debate about ethics and technology. If technology alters our sense of identity, agency, intention, and consciousness, affecting how we evaluate the actions we take, the phenomena we encounter, and the judgments we make, then there is a consequence for how we conceive of and assign moral responsibility in our online lives. There is some precedent for this way of thinking about technology in the work of Bruno Latour, who considered seriously the moral significance of technologies in the effects exerted on our practices and habits. Latour takes his cue from Heidegger and suggests that our relationship with technology can be better explained with a concept of networked reality to capture the complex ways humans and nonhumans are intertwined and, more importantly, how nonhumans can also be moral agents. According to Latour's theory, technologies form "scripts" that encourage users to act in particular ways. Though the intention of the user is not overridden by the script of the technology, there exists a network between the two that then allows for the technology to take on moral significance (Latour, 2002). This idea of moral significance is extended further by Verbeek, who, in his consideration of obstetric ultrasound, argues technology constructs "a modern, heteronomous moral subject whose actions are always interwoven with the material environment in which they play out" (Verbeek, 2011, p. 22). Verbeek calls the association between humans and reality the "interpreted reality" and human existence "situated subjectivity." His example of a sonogram illustrates how and for what reasons

technological mediation can make moral dilemmas apparent and acute, demanding decisions about genetic defects, such as Down Syndrome and more in the course of a pregnancy, where before technological mediation there might have been none (Verbeek, 2011). His postphenomenological approach “moves beyond the predominating modernist understanding of the relations between subjects and objects in ethics, in which subjects are active and intentional and objects are passive and mute” (Verbeek, 2011, p. 16). The present work takes the insights of Verbeek and Latour to provide the philosophical justification for the morally significant mediating role of social networking technologies on perception, existence, and experience of reality online and for the consideration of the consequences for our own morality.

Chapter 3 takes up the issue of human agency online and considers the mediating effect of social networking technologies on the ways in which we form our intentions, beliefs, and reactive attitudes. These technologies may allow us newfound freedom, liberating us from the physical constraints of real time and space, but there also may be unintended consequences for us. This is not to say human agency is destined to be harmful or contentious when mediated by social networking technologies; rather, it is to tease out the differences that might be relevant to the formation of our intentions, beliefs, and reactive attitudes online. Whether human agency can be affected by the circumstances within which it is exercised is not entirely novel. Modern philosophy has long wrestled with the perennial tension between free will and determinism and has struggled to understand when free will has been shown not to be entirely free because of the limiting or enabling effects of its physical reality. Hume, for example, observed that if actions are produced by motives, and motives are linked to the physical phenomenon, then free will, where “liberty which is opposed to necessity,” cannot be used to characterize human action (Hume, 1907, p. 100). A similar sort of tension exists when evaluating the enabling or limiting effects of social networking technology on human agency. If the mediating role of technologies affects the formation of our intentions, beliefs, and reactive attitudes, how should we account for the moral qualities of the technology and understand its effects on human agency? P. F. Strawson’s insights in his article “Freedom and Resentment” and some of the many critiques that followed are also helpful to considering how and why our online communications might affect how we form our intentions, beliefs, and reactive attitudes behind collective and individual human agency and how we conceive of moral responsibility. According to Strawson,

the idea of holding individuals responsible is part of our political and social practices and “neither calls for nor permits, an external ‘rational’ justification” (Strawson, 1992, p. 23). From this point of view, human agency exists in our reactive attitudes and the moral judgments we form about individuals; this “central commonplace” is a helpful basis for understanding how and under what circumstances the capacity for human agency exists even in the face of causal constraints. A person may hurt us physically or emotionally, for example, but we are more inclined to temper our reactions if the action was not intended or was misdirected (Bennett, 2008). Consider the implications of the “central commonplace” when it forms online. As we shift our interactions to an online forum, our knowledge of individuals and the reasons behind their actions is affected. We may understand little about those with whom we interact and, at the same time, the images or phenomena we encounter online may be presented in a way that engenders intense reactions that lead us to believe there is a widely shared sense of morality when, in fact, there is a relatively narrow perspective generated by the online community with whom we are interacting. Both of these phenomenological effects can influence the kinds of moral judgments we make and the beliefs, intentions, and reactive attitudes we form that we use to inform our actions. We may want to attack an individual online for what we perceive as their moral wrongs, but the judgments we form or the information we use to make them may be, at best, based on distorted information or, at worst, completely misinformed because of the shallowness of our understanding. The nature of our relationships (subjective versus objective, individual versus collective) has an important consequence for the moral judgments we make and the blame or lack thereof we might attribute to our actions, and this is especially true when we move online.

How we evaluate the causal responsibility for our actions online is also important to understanding the effects of virtual reality on human agency. Hume, for instance, speaks to the kinds of mistakes we make when we perceive will as a causal mechanism, and this problem is exacerbated in our online actions but perhaps in the inverse way. We may misapprehend the causal mechanism of our behavior online or underestimate its devastating effects on others. We may even attribute will where there is no intention or attach blame to others where there is none. Our own sense of blameworthiness might even be ignored because we do not see ourselves as responsible. The perception of causal connection between our behavior and the effects may be altered in our online communications (one posting exists indefinitely online) or our behavior