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ETHICS AND AESTHETICS IN A SOCIAL CYBERWORLD

Meera Baindur[24]

Introduction

This chapter attempts to bring ethical questions about the online world to the discussion in order to answer and explore some important themes around the prolific world of social media. While most ethicists worry about the presence of the media itself, and suggest that these platforms are somehow detrimental to the human spirit, this essay is an attempt to look at some of the unique problems of content, particularly those that don't attract the attention of the mainstream philosophers. Instagram for instance is less subjected to the moral gaze as compared to Facebook, which has had a negative or positive impact on real life events. I posit that there are issues of ethical interest even within the visual photographic posts of Instagram.

This essay also attempts to use some ethical principles from non-western thought (Indian Philosophy) to discuss the ethical theories. It is hoped that this chapter will stimulate the interests of serious scholars as well as community leaders to understand and study this phenomenon as a significant part of social life now and in the future, and not to dismiss these platforms as mere distractions or addictions of a younger generation.

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A while ago, with the coming of the television, scholars and intellectuals remarked on the phenomenon that brought the world into the living room, an invasion of public events that was transmitted into the heart of our family space, into our homes. A similar transformation has occurred gradually in contemporary times, with a huge influx of what is popularly known as social media content that is generated and shared by individuals who create 'posts' on these platforms. In a sense, people are putting their 'living rooms' into the world for consumption. These types of content are also shared, re-shared and discussed in platforms that allow for instantaneous judgements, of 'likes', 'comments', and, sometimes, 'dislikes' and 'censure'. There are new forms of social collectives wherein dissent, retaliation, and expression are formed requiring us to reimagine the ideas of justice, ethical paradigms about opinions and private information. Standard paradigms can evaluate textual posts that are opinions or articles and also evaluate ethical agencies of actors who write them.

While traditional discourses of media ethics can be applied to some forms of content, say posts on current issues and appeals for justice, hate speech and trolling, some innocuous posts such as "good morning" posts, photographs of vacations and food and artwork, jokes, memes, and poetry also dominate these platforms that seem too banal to be scrutinized as moral issues. A private life displayed on the screen is entertaining for others, blurring the line between public and private, between geographies and nations, between real and the fictional, and moreover it has consumed all aspects of our lives.[25] In this essay I will use some examples of Instagram posts, focusing on visually dominant social media posts to understand the ethical implications of this

[25] Popular web statistics reports indicate that there were about 26.9 million users of Instagram in the world in early 2020 and every month more people are joining in. In India over 280 million are registered on Facebook and it is the most popular social media network in the region.

phenomenon. I will refer to a system of ethics prevalent in Indian philosophy that seems to capture the moral framework of this virtual world.

Ethical Questions Related to Social Media in General

Two main factors contribute to the ambiguity of ethical interests in the space of social media, in particular those that show considerable opinion sharing like Twitter or Facebook. Firstly, the internet can support content that has uncertain origins. So, people do not feel causally related to originating unethical content, they are just passive transmitters of such information. Most of this transmission is 'click bait' or sensationalized news and posts. Most of these posts have no original author and are just forwarded or reposted. Sometimes original authors do raise an objection and claim ownership but as the image circulates, notions of copyright fade and there is no actual discernible origin that can be held accountable for the content, especially those that proffer advice or are unverified images. Guru and Sarukkai (2019) refer to the "authorless authority" of social media. According to them, a non-agential authority is a form of authority that does not have a specific agent as the authority figure. Traditions are one form of this agentless authority. They posit:

> "There is no agent who can take responsibility for wielding authority and thus this authority also has no obvious notion of responsibility that is available."

Furthermore, they suggest that rumour and gossip, such as those transmitted in the social media also have a similar lack of an agent. "Rumour and gossip really have no authors, nobody who can be held accountable. It is dispersive and generates power in its retellings." They further recount that social media functions like rumour and gossip and that it, "attempts to legitimise itself and begins to function as a form of

social authority through a similar mechanism." So, we find that content on social media ends up in a public space with almost no authorship responsibility.

The second issue with social media posts is that people do not perceive the consequences of their action in a concrete and relatable manner. The sites of agency, particularly in the virtual world are separated remotely from the sites of affect in the real world, and so in the case of phenomena such as cyber bullying, trolling, and fake news. The areas of affect are far removed from the perpetrator in terms of physical space. On the other hand, for agents who perceive themselves as ethical, hypervigilance about posting content on the internet has also become a common phenomenon. People judge the posts for appropriateness rather than actual social action. This appropriate perspective is commonly called "wokeness" and has again resulted in a lot of backlash on people who are regularly present on social media platforms.[26] In case of violence of language in comments or trolling in the virtual world, sometimes the only way people can get free of their online abusers is by isolating themselves from the social media or blocking communication from people that they perceive as a threat. People privatize their social media account, limiting their feed to friends and their select group, which again has an impact on their lives.

Instagram however seems to slide into a different kind of category among social media platforms. On Instagram, people want to be heard and seen and recognized as authors of content. Therefore, most accounts are public and most casual surfers do enjoy seeing the recognized posts in what we can term as a virtual public space. Let us look at some

[26] An opinion piece on "The Problem with Wokeness" by David Brooks in the New York Times (June 7, 2018) states, "But wokeness jams together the perceiving and the proposing. In fact, wokeness puts more emphasis on how you perceive a situation — how woke you are to what is wrong — than what exactly you plan to do about it. To be woke is to understand the full injustice".

phenomena and experiences associated with this platform to have a discussion on engaged ethics. I begin with describing a common 'selfie' phenomenon, on Instagram.

The Virtual Life on Instagram

Ragini (name changed) my young university graduate friend adjusted her camera filter on the phone and she has clicked over twenty five photographs of herself. Then and after selecting one and adding a cute filter, she posts it on Instagram and co-shares it to her stories and her Facebook page. She types the text below the picture: "Hello there, y'all, good morning!", followed by a 'kisses' emoticon symbol. She follows this with listing hashtags that include about 20 themes including #earlymorningface, #nomakeup, #sleepyhead, #sleptlate, #beforebreakfast, #readyfortheday, and finally #feelingpositive. This picture will show up on the scroll feed view of about 500 followers that she has. Within minutes around 30 people have seen her stories and about 20 people have liked her post. She is anxious and keeps checking her account until she has got about a hundred likes on this post. Then she relaxes into her routine. The picture itself is a private window into her life: it shows her getting up in the morning and clicking a selfie shot on her bed. But in reality, she was up for an hour earlier and had spent time on hair and makeup creating a pillow-face look, messy hair styled to perfection. After clearing away the actual mess of books and laptop on her bed and, artistically laying out her bed sheet with the creases in the correct place so that the shadows do not fall in the wrong places, she had positioned herself on the pillow her hair tucked into its place with invisible hairpins. She had a bedside lamp positioned to catch the best features of her face and then has edited and selected one out of the many pictures she had clicked. For those not familiar with Instagram posts who are wondering what the fuss is about, #sleepyface has about 24.5 thousand posts of sleeping people and sleepy cats and a typical image

posted in public with a followed hashtag, may garner anywhere between 500 to 12,000 'likes', which means that so many more people have seen the photograph.

It is easy to understand the ethical restraints that are imposed on organizations that telecast news and media into our living rooms, but the kind of ethical and moral reasoning required to understand the public availability of privately generated content requires a re-examination of questions of justice and morality that can be applied to this phenomenon. Concerns around the idea of individuals being both generators and consumers of content require that we examine the new forms of ethical reasoning required for a disembodied affect.

In the next few sections, I intend to analyse the different ethical questions with respect to the social media posts from two perspectives. Firstly, the moral question of social media itself, perceiving time spent on the internet, particularly on these platforms as a vice. Deriving from an ethical tradition of Greek philosophy, which insists that a virtuous life that leads to the flourishing of human life. The second question relates these virtual presentations of the self as diminished experience, and also posts about oneself in the virtual world encourage self-deception or a projection of an inauthentic, isolated self. In this chapter, I will also describe a few case examples of ethical conflicts and issues that came up during my own participation in the Instagram community and discuss the ethical implications of each using some new multicultural forms of ethical concepts.

The Virtual and the Real

A few years ago, even as I joined the online gaming community by playing multiplayer virtual reality games, I was soon addicted to playing these games. It was like a hobby addiction. For me, this addiction was something like being a part of a 'gang' or a fan group. After an eight hour almost continuous stint on a Sunday chasing online villains and

upgrading my character from level 12 to level 24, I was left with a headache, a wrist strain and a painful realisation that I had lost time for rest and relaxation. My game partners from different parts of the game were there with me the whole time, some of them were not sleeping in the night. We had virtually spent 8 x 10 person-hours chasing a fictional villain in a world where you were an avatar with superpowers. The physical exhaustion of working at a desk and the adrenaline rush were the after effects of this marathon playing, but as to the quality of my time, I cannot deny I did derive as much pleasure from it as say watching a movie marathon, spending time on a long match in a spectator sport like cricket or football, or going to an all-night party. My body was sore but mentally I had one of the most interesting times of my life.

Most interaction of communities on social media is evaluated for its consequences related to possible self-harm or in terms of the consequences it has on the reduced experience of life. The argument for this comes from the idea that, somehow, we lead a less than enriched life on the virtual platforms and so our digital interactions are but pale shadows of a richer multi-sensorial experience. For example, a discussion on Facebook is less fulfilling than a gathering of friends talking in a café. On the other hand, writing about the experience of immersion in the net, Thieme (2004:22-23) suggests that cyberspace is a territory of immersive social exploration:

> "The Internet is not so much a set of skills as it is a culture. Guided by mentors, learning like wolves to hunt together, we learn how to hang in the medium. The images on our monitors are icons, windows disclosing possibilities far beyond our home planet. Inner and outer space alike are explored by tele-robotic sensory extensions, revealing the medium in which we have always been swimming."

Cyberspace or the virtual world on social media is not an individual experience. It is as social as our exploration of new territories. It is also a continuous learning space. Learning is informal and mediated by mentors of different kinds: technological mentors or content mentors or even group mentors (a social group that sometimes even takes on the name of "tribe" or "instafam" even if everyone is just a 'virtual' friend).

Why do the older generation view digital media with suspicion? This generation gap has resulted in surprisingly negative theorising about the digital world, paying less or no attention to its significance as a valid social experience. This is perhaps because the people evaluating and theorising about social media, (such as me) live in a transitional phase of moving to a digital society. This is perhaps because, the people doing theory (including ethics) are not as adventurous or familiar with the social media platforms as younger people, who are very familiar with the various platforms, and younger people are still not old enough yet to begin theorising about their participation. Sometimes academics studying social media are almost anthropologists studying a tribe of people who are so different from them that within the interpretations of what it is to be a virtual self, there is already a bias about these forms of engagements.

In this context, Roache (2019:138) argues that the ideal of friendship that is being used to judge friendships and community on the social media is real world friendship. Critiquing a position that social media friendships are inferior compared to friendships in the actual world, she argues that, for people who have had real friendships and time to hangout in their neighbourhoods, the substitution of a virtual friendship seems like a cost to intimacy and that makes virtual friendships only of value if they are an added extension of real-world friendships. On the other hand, young people seem to have no problems with friendships on social media; they see virtual friendships as being as valuable as friendships in the real world.

The other assumption is that all experiences of the real world are sensually rich and yield value to our life. Modern ways of living, in most people's everyday lives are still lacking stimulation for our senses and unless one makes the effort to create enriching experiences in the real world, a computer screen game experience is no different from a regular visit to a football stadium. However, in the absence of an actual opportunity to play a game, even a sports spectator has no experience. It is likely that an interactive virtual game may be equally engaging for a netzian. A friend on the internet may provide better support and be more available or more relatable to, than a friend who lives next door. Many 'netzians' feel closer to the community of online people who are more like themselves and seem to resonate with their own values, ideas and opinions.

If social belongingness is given by inter-subjectivity, the immersive technologies of these platforms seem to create genuine spaces for interactions to take place. We are capable of occupying physical spaces with other human beings and yet not experience belonging. Social barriers like caste, gender, that of differently abled people, race and even nationalities create a lack of diverse social experiences in the public physical space. The problem is again that in continuously comparing the virtual world to the standards of a real world, we forget to account for the diversities of experience in the real world. There are possibilities of exclusions and lack of true friendship and companionship in the real world as much as there is that possibility in the virtual world. The only difference is that the tactile senses are absent, the body is absent in a real way. In cultures where the body plays an important role in affiliations, the virtual world will diminish the quality of experience. In cultures where touch is already mediated by strict social rules, I suggest that the lack of tactile feedback seems to matter less. [27]

[27] In India perhaps it is most evident because of social barriers to touch and hugs in most communities. In fact, sometimes a hug may be viewed as a violation of

It may seem to an observer that a young person who is hanging out with a phone or a computer, is not interested any more in actual friendships or in hanging out with the family. Similar ideas prevailed with the coming of the television and of the internet. But on these platforms is the individual truly isolated? It is also possible that the person is engaging intentionally with her group of friends on Facebook or arguing fiercely with a group of dissenters on Instagram. Unlike the television and the newspapers, through the medium of these platforms it is not so much that the social media comes into the individual space but rather that the individual places themselves into the social media intentionally. Physically represented, an individual is putting up a notice board for others to see, a display cabinet that represents them and the feelings, opinions and images that she wants to convey.

I also want to add a note on the physical experience from a gender sensitive perspective. In many cultures physical public spaces including playgrounds, streets, and restaurants are unsafe for women. Even within the domestic space, for instance, non-social media time is not about improving quality of life or relaxing. The time offline is filled with domestic chores for most girls and women. They are already isolated in some sense. We have had cases of "bored housewives" who use the internet as an escape from their everyday reality. Until the time that we can provide real world alternatives, social media belongingness may not be such a bad thing for women.[28]

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personal space particularly for women. I had to teach final year college students how to shake hands firmly with the opposite sex as a part of their placement orientation.

[28] An article in the media refers to these numbers among women users of the internet:https://www.indiatvnews.com/business/india/housewives-use-maximum-internet-iamai-report-18792.html. The article points out that about 26% of women who are homemakers surf the web and many of them have also used the virtual world to start businesses and work from home. Though actual

Is There a Separate Fake Virtual Self?

The most censure of social media posts has to do with the genre of photographs called selfies. Katz, J., & Crocker, E. (2016 Katz, J., & Crocker, E. 2016) suggest that not only has the act of taking selfies been condemned but the act of studying them also has come under criticism. "Selfie" posts thus become the central stereotype under which forms of fake-self projection and self-advertisement face censure.

So now, we begin to address the second question. Does participating in social media diminish our authenticity and sense of the self? Are we engaging in deceit when we post our lives on social media? When we look at Ragini's presence in this virtual world or check her posts on Instagram, we find we know her interests, what she enjoys eating, the books she reads. It seems to archive her life almost like a dairy. From the comments on her posts, we can gauge who her friends are, who they love to hang out with and what TV series they love watching. But the question that seems to bother us is simple: is this her "real" life or is she "faking it"?

The reason we feel that Ragini is faking her life on these posts is because we find her selectively sharing her moments on Instagram. Unlike a sensational autobiography written to reveal all aspects of life, good and bad, we feel that there may be fictional or untrue elements in her posts. She may not own the jewellery she wore on a post or the pretty beach may have an overflowing dustbin just out of the reach of the camera angle. She might have used a filter to make the image brighter, neater, and more vibrant. As we have seen in the example above, she has modelled a sleepy face, which is not actually her sleepy face.

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digital penetration in India is low, among those who can access networks and technology, housewives form a large segment of users.

Speaking about the projection of oneself online, Child (2011:18) discusses the nature of a body project in the virtual world when people create avatars or digital identities.

> "Since these environments enable interaction between people to be conducted entirely online, the absence of direct visual and (usually) audio contact and the flexibility. The technology provides for creating digital representation, enables users to adopt new identities without physical constraints, becoming an idealised 'body project'."

Even so, plagiarising content or photo-shopping yourself in locations you have never visited are more easily seen as instances of "cheating" or "deception...". Advertisements in a sense are also a form of deception, but we are less annoyed because we do not hold advertisers to account for honesty. The authenticity question becomes more important when commerce or profits are attached to it. Sponsorship has to be declared in the posts.

The Microcelebrity Problems

Researchers working on social media platforms have begun to examine what they call attention economy. When a social media presence garners many followers, the person becomes an influencer, otherwise referred to as a microcelebrity.

> "Microcelebrity is defined as a set of practices where in a user's audience is viewed as a fan base with whom they constantly engage to ensure continued popularity. Presenting the self must be specially constructed and managed for consumption." (Bishop, 2019:35)

One of the problems with microcelebrity accounts is the problem of their position as public influencers or as public figures. Some internet

celebrities have an exceptionally large fan following. A professional golfer turned influencer has over fifty-nine thousand followers on Instagram in 2018, one of the top ten that year. Companies approach the influencers with gifts and free products and feel it is a good way to approach direct marketing. The moment I hit 500 followers on Instagram, I was approached by several brands of beauty products and clothes, (never mind that my posts were all book reviews) to endorse them in exchange for free products.

The ethical position of influencers, even if they are not brand ambassadors is seen as unethical, particularly if they do not keep up with the popular social causes. Fans who give these people their time and attention demand that these celebrities represent the opinions of their fans. With increasing awareness of social issues on Instagram, social influencers find themselves unable to respond quick enough to social pressures and being "woke." Like celebrities, they are under pressure to be socially responsible, promote brands ethically and associate themselves with the right people and participate in community building. Failure to do so draws censure and sometimes even threats. As influencers, the ethical responsibility increases as their accountability increases. In Indian philosophy, the people who are influencers are called the *Shresta*, (lit. 'Significant'). The people who are significant have a public responsibility to behave in proper ways. In fact, a verse in the Bhagavad-Gita text says: "Whatever way a great person behaves, people behave the same way. By whatever standards he acts, the entire world follows that."[29] The implication is once someone becomes significant in society, they are to be responsible for the kinds of action they participate in.

We have seen this phenomenon of self-presentation in celebrity life as represented in the media. Celebrities are called on by their professions to continuously project themselves in how they want people

[29] Translation by the author

to see them, not necessarily how they are. In fact, there are many professionals who are coaches in makeovers and presentation. In turn we have a new generation of microcelebrity called influencers on social media who do have the power to sway people towards an opinion or a product. More than a thousand people follow their accounts and they are not celebrities in real life. Is my friend a celebrity or is she trying to imitate a celebrity, is she being aesthetic in projecting herself as someone who's just woken up, or is she acting out a role of a model?

Community and the Virtual World

This sense of a diminished self that is projected somewhat inauthentically comes from a presupposition that one must be honest about one's nature, and not misrepresent or exaggerate one's position on these platforms. The question here is, is there an authentic self that one should project even in the physical world? In social gatherings is it not common that we put on fake smiles and graciously congratulate the hostess even when the food is terrible? What is the authentic self that has been diminished in an Instagram post that has been prearranged and curated? If we cannot apply the moral grounds of honest self-expression to Instagram, then would not that be a very a social space? Wouldn't it be a place where 'anything goes'? One could say that understanding the self as being always fluid, projecting and not permanent is a better position to stand in than some authentic self, limiting our being to a particular set of characteristics and its expression as unmediated in the real world. A part of this also confronts the idea that a camera is a truthful 'eye'. This in itself is a flawed premise.

In such a case, how do we to begin to understand the moral phenomenon around these posts on social media platforms? I suggest that a good moral framework for understanding these phenomena would not be sufficient using our traditional ethics of media and censorship,

but would require us to work through an ethics of art aesthetics or think through an ethics of curatorship.

Ragini's behaviour may even seem narcissistic and totally irrelevant to many people who have not experienced the pressures of belonging to a virtual world. As I discussed Instagram with some of my older colleagues, they were dismissive. "It's just self-obsessed behaviour and addiction. They had better read a good book or do something useful with their time." Yet others described it as a part of the affiliation need of younger people, an addiction to being popular, reprehensible as "a waste of time." However, for Ragini and many others like her, Instagram is a serious part of their community life. Their sense of belonging is defined by the numerous online groups and virtual friends they belong to. The belongingness of a virtual life is actually a real experience, a part of the social make-up of a netzian.

This brings us to the first ethical issue that underlies people's engagement with social media, the vice of self-harm. While people who engage with social media for some purpose are judged by their purposiveness—to market a home-made product, to call attention to a social problem, to share tips for a crafts project, a book, a reader's discussion forum and so on, a non-purposive voyeuristic use of social media is frowned upon as non-virtuous. People of my generation born in the seventies, or before (including me) are sometimes apologetic about using Facebook or Instagram.

Most of my posts on Instagram are around book reviews. I became aware of a conflict in my reader community on Instagram about a post of a book image. A community of book readers on Instagram call themselves "bookstagrammars". Bookstagrammars not only review books, but they stage the book along with other objects creating a visual panorama. Sometimes publishers may have sent them a copy of the book but mostly they are readers who love the aesthetics of their books. In this case, one reader wanted to post the review of a book so she just used

a screenshot of an original book displayed on a bookstagrammar's public account, reposted it without credit and wrote her review. According to her she was just "using an image" of the book that she had, the content and her reading were genuine. When this second image began to circulate widely, the original creator noticed her photograph being used without credit and called out the "plagiarism" in public. The community broke into an argument over this and lots of schisms appeared in this community. The original creator spoke about the 'labour' and creative input that she had spent on setting up the image. The original creator considered a screenshot without acknowledgement as an insult to that artistic effort.

So, what is the moral standing of the person who reposted? If we look at the post as an aesthetic project rather than an intellectual one, we can compare it to art imitation. If someone copies the Mona Lisa work of art, an expert or even a lay person knows it is a copy and it is a 'fake', but in case of a digital media it's possible to exactly recreate the curation, imitation is simpler. Professionals use copyrights and ownership claims. If a boss takes credit for an employee's work or a daughter passes off her mother's art as her own, these issues become more complicated. In recording this seemingly banal protest about the wrongful use of a photograph, there is something nuanced that comes into play here that is so foundational to the social that one does not actually consider it as a 'moral' rule. Therefore, we need a nuanced combination of ethical principles that highlight the context of these reposts. Are they recreations or copies?

Furthermore, we could discuss the ethics of community inclusions and exclusions within the framework of these posts that are meant for the consumption of a group or a community, and then it is bound by the rules of that particular community. This is not a universal consequential ethics but a normative position or what I would choose to call as contextual ethics.

The theory we can use appropriately to understand this social form of ethical behaviour is perhaps virtue ethics. As flourishing of oneself is aided by following virtuous action, which is not to copy. But virtue is context independent and such ethical dilemmas are what we can call as context dependent. In these online communities, an implicit set of rules that are expected to be followed are present. These implicit rules within the community create social norms, a 'code of honour' if we can call it that. The idea of a moral code given by one's place and standing comes from the concept of *Dharma,* the moral code in Indian philosophy. Unlike a list of virtues that are good or bad intrinsically, dharma is given by context, and following any type of code has its consequence, (intended or unintended) that is popularly known as 'karma'.

The code of dharma for any person is based on where one wants to be and who one wants to be, given by a being's relationship to the world around them. For instance, if one wants to be a 'mother', under the mother's code of *dharma*, one can make excuses for a child's criminal behaviour, it is the right code of conduct because a mother's dharma is to protect. The same person as an upstanding citizen, following the code of a patriotic citizen may give up her child to the police if she so desires. Both these actions are right within their own contexts; both are wrong when viewed from the other context. So, if the person who reposted considered herself a bookstagrammer, she is wrong to have used the image, it was her 'dharma' to acknowledge the original, given that she accepted she belonged in the community. Since the space she used to post this was a part of the community's or of the tribe's, she was bound by these implicit rules. So, the community decided that she had lost their trust and she lost the support of many followers within a day, a kind of a social boycott by the community that punished her.

Judging a Social Media Post: Beauty not Truth

But what kind of moral framework or agency would be appropriate for the people who post on Instagram like my friend Ragini? Can we even begin to judge such an action of posting a selfie from a moral framework? Is it just an innocuous act of self-projection, an advertisement of the persona, or of the good life one is leading? Most people seem to think so. Psychological problems associated with seeing other people in unrealistic situations or having unrealistically happy or curated lives has also led to a movement of hashtags that would say #reallife, #nofilter, #thisisreal, #authenticselfie, #AsIam and so on.

Culture and geography seemingly transcended in the cyberspace are a very influential part of the moral frame of representation of oneself. Capurro (2013:212) writes:

> "We are still far from a global digital culture of mutual respect, validation and appreciation based on trust with regard to such cultural differences. Trust is engendered by an understanding of the otherness of the other self/selves, enabling new forms of interplay between personal and socio-cultural who-ness and opening new spaces of freedom to show ourselves and our selves off and also withdraw from such self-display in both the Cyberworld and the physical world".

We know that there are three main streams of ethics that can be used to understand most conceptions of moral behaviour traditionally, they are: Aristotelian virtue ethics; deontological ethics; and consequentialism. While virtue ethics focuses on action that is right because it cultivates values and virtues and an action is wrong when it cultivates vices, deontology explains ethics with reference to duties and moral rules. Consequentialism of course, judges an action with reference to the consequences of one's behaviour.

The nature of the projected post if seen as a presentation of the life of the person uploading the post is in some sense autobiographical; we may be required to judge the intention or the motive of the post. I posit here that this intention has to be considered but the category of motive must be much more similar to the intention of an artist, and not that of a person under oath to reveal the truth and nothing but the truth.

Artists do not paint the world as it is. They paint the world as they would like other people to feel it or see it. They colour and curate the visual and the text through their imagination. In that sense, Ragini is creating a piece of art that is digital, even if she does not declare it so. Her photo is performative, and it affects her followers as a performance would. The effect is perhaps the very reason why her followers read and follow her posts. The act of such a social media post is the creation of virtual art, performative, textual, oral, or digital. Thus, the social form of the posts, particularly the ones that cannot be actually against the law or a deliberate threat must be seen as art. Created and shared on an ephemeral medium no doubt, but still art.

On a study of Instagram posts by a specific community, Haynes (2016) writes of the curation process on Instagram:

> "For many users worldwide, this is the appeal of Instagram – turning the ordinary into the nostalgically beautiful. It allows for the curation of a set of photographs that displays the artistic sensibilities of the user, the beautiful places they have visited, their stylised selfies and their clever eye for finding interesting compositions among the ordinary moments of life."[30]

[30] Haynes, Nell. 2016. *Social Media in Northern Chile,* London: UCL Press, p.72, https://www.uclpress.co.uk/products/83112

Conclusion

What kind of aesthetic ethics can be applied to digital art? If we go by Tolstoy's claim that art should have a purpose, then most of the posts on Instagram cannot be considered as 'art'. Some of these captured photographs are "time pass" or ways of overcoming boredom. If we consider that art is a representation of an artist's vantage point, then perhaps we could raise ethical questions about representation itself or about the voices or objects that are represented.

Here I bring to the discussion my second case study, based on the idea of concealment, some things that were inadvertently shared by someone and then lead to issues and problems for other people. This is the fall out of a peculiar principle where one can "repost" other people's images and feed on one's post and popularize the feed, but as discussed in the earlier post, it has to be acknowledged with the name of the original "handle". In this case, a person posted something on her private account, an image of her drinking. She was careful to keep this account private from her family as her parents did not support women drinking alcohol. Another friend, in all innocence wanting to wish her happy birthday, screenshot the image of her friend, and made a virtual post in her account that was public. The family were notified, and there were repercussions for the girl breaking a family rule.

Véliz (2019:152) discusses in detail the notion of privacy on the internet and comments about the dangers of loss of privacy and its consequences. We know that non-consensual sharing of other people's information causes both individual and collective harm. So perhaps the extra curation is meant to extend this notion of privacy to a kind of a barrier that conceals the real. The act of a curated digital representation of one's life is an attempt to show yet not reveal one's private spaces and life unconsciously. Candid photos of people, unless having voyeuristic value, tend to be posted less. Therefore, what we see as in concealing the authentic may actually be derived from the idea of "do no

harm", the ethical value of *ahimsa* or nonviolence. While nonviolence is normally used in a sense of bodily harm, the principle in theory applies both to expressed communication and unexpressed intention. A kind of ethical censorship or self-censorship becomes then a resolution of the moral guideline for posting. Similar practices like that of a trigger warning about graphic content, or that something is inappropriate for children are now used.

If we consider social media posts such as those on Instagram or its video cousin, Reels (also TikTok) as mediums of popular art like graffiti or banners, we can look at the ethical framework through which we evaluate art. Larger questions of truth and authenticity or even social accountability may not be suitable for the context of a beautiful image of a breakfast plate. In fact, even its edibility may not be validated, the picture stands for what a food photo can be, not what it should be as a food item. Rather than subject social media posts to norms or to the moral gaze of ethical righteousness, we could allow for the generosity of creative expression and flexibility that is allowed by the digital medium. Given that Instagram is as valid as a public social space, the community seems to also self-monitor and correct itself; people who are new learn the ropes and then join the community as initiates and learners.[31]

Netzian Vocabulary Guide

Clickbait: content whose main purpose is to attract attention and encourage visitors to click on a link to a particular web page.

Social Media Platforms: social media applications such as Facebook and Instagram, other discussion vlogs that allow visual posts

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to uploaded for viewing and comment by others. Loosely the term has begun to incorporate WhatsApp and other 'text messenger' platforms that allow for group posts too.

Instagram Handle: Your account name on Instagram, your cyber address/ identity that can be tagged with the @ sign.

Feed: A feed is a set of notifications that show up on the screen on social media when new content/comments or likes are posted by someone. Your feed usually shows up as a series of unread posts on your personal home page of the application.

Hashtag: the symbol #: This symbol is used to connect the post under topical tags that allows it to show up easily on searches. Multiple hashtags ensure that a book, for example, can show up under reviews, the author name, the genre, reading recommendations, or even your personal preference for reading. These also help follow one's interests and search for new handles to follow.

Influencers: People who have more than a thousand followers and a fan base on Instagram (also called Microcelebrities)

Groups: collection of individuals that gather around a theme. Say a fan following of some author, a crafts group, etc. Instagram and Facebook have pages for groups. Also used by commercial establishments as a visitors' page to announce products and create a personal interaction with their customer base. Bookstagram, foodgram, travelgram and so on are all topical hashtags and communities that follow themes.

Instafam/tribe: Words used to describe a closely knit group on Instagram. People refer to each other as part of "my tribe" on Instagram.

Stories: Temporary videos or photos that stay on your profile for a limited time. More instantaneous and ephemeral than posts, stories are mini films or slide shows.

Followers/army: A group of people who follow you on your feed. If your feed is public, you can have strangers following your stories and posts.

DM: Acronym for a direct message.

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