Ethical Behaviour in Technology–Mediated Communication

Sutirtha Chatterjee
Washington State University, USA

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In this information age, serious concerns with unethical behaviour in information technology (e.g., software piracy, deception, plagiarism, etc.) have cast doubts on the claims of the unmitigated success of rapid adoption of information technology. Surprisingly, there have been very few studies in information systems (IS) that have tried to understand the general rise in such unethical behaviours with respect to information technology. Especially, the question that remains to be understood is: Are these problems of unethical behaviour representative of the human nature at large, or are they related to characteristics of technology in any way? This article tries to partly answer this question. It looks at dyadic communicative behaviour using technology-mediated communication and proposes *a conceptual model* of unethical communicative behaviour. To summarize, the question(s) that this article tries to address are:

In a dyadic technology-based communication between two individuals, what characteristics of technology-based media influence unethical behaviour for an individual? Does individual difference have a role to play in affecting such unethical behaviour? If so, how does it do so?

In answering these questions, the article poses arguments based on literature on media richness, social presence, and deindividuation, and also philosophy-based ethical outlooks of an individual.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Unethical Communicative Behaviour

Chatterjee (2005) defined unethical usage of information technology as the violation of privacy, property, accuracy, and access of an individual or an organization by another individual or organization. Since violations of property and access might not be directly relatable to a communicative scenario, this article defines *unethical communicative behaviour between two individuals as the violation of the privacy and/or accuracy of an individual by another individual*. It should be noted that commonly identified forms of unethical communicative behaviour mentioned in the literature (e.g., flaming, swearing, insults, deception, etc.) fall within the scope of violation of either *privacy* (e.g., insults) or *accuracy* (e.g., deception).

Technology-Based Media Characteristics

The key features of technology-based communicative media have been addressed in the media richness literature in IS. Richness of media is the ability to unequivocally transfer the message from the sender to the recipient (Daft & Lengel, 1986). The ability to do this depends on numerous characteristics that the media possesses. Kumar and Benbasat (2002) provide a nice review summary of the key *media characteristics* identified in the media richness literature over the years. These are presented in the following:

- **Modality:** The degree to which a media can support a variety of symbols to present rich information.
- **Synchronicity:** The ability of the media to support communication in real time.
- **Contingency:** The extent to which the communication responses are pertinent to previous responses.
- **Participation:** The extent to which the media supports the active engagement of senders and receivers in the communication.
- **Identification:** The extent to which the senders and receivers are identified (as opposed to being anonymous) by the media.

- **Propinquity:** The extent to which the media supports communication between geographically dispersed senders and receivers
- **Anthromorphism:** The degree to which the interface simulates or incorporates characteristics pertinent to human beings.
- **Rehearsability:** The extent to which the media supports fine tuning of the message before sending.
- **Reprocessability:** The extent to which the media supports messages to be reexamined within the same context.

This summarization forms the fundamental set of antecedents in this article. Latter sections of the article argue how these key media characteristics ultimately influence unethical communicative behaviour.

Media Richness and Social Presence

Technology-based communication is a mediated experience (Biocca, Burgoon, Harms, & Stoner, 2001) with the aim to emulate face-to-face (FTF) communication. The primary aim of technology-mediated communication is to make the mediation disappear (as in FTF) in order to result in a perception of "being there" and "being together" (Biocca et al., 2001, p. 1). Social presence—defined as the extent of perception (of users of a media) that the media conveys the communicators' physical presence in terms of humanness, sociability, personalness, and warmth (Baker, 2002)—also revolves around the ideas of "being there" and being "together."

Existing literature on media richness (e.g., Rice, 1992; Kinney & Dennis, 1994) has always linked media richness to social presence. It has been argued that FTF differs significantly than other environments because it exudes a greater perception of presence than other media. Media that are not sufficiently rich have limited capability to transfer information from the sender to the receiver and have a lower social presence than media that are high in richness. Media richness and social presence are essentially two sides of the same coin and can be defined individually in terms of the other. For example, a rich media is one that exudes a greater social presence, and a higher social presence implies a richer communicative media. Evidence of this fact can be found in the literature (Carlson & Davis, 1998), and the fact that social presence and media richness have been grouped together under the "Trait Theories of Media Selection"(Kumar & Benbasat 2002).

Following Kinney and Dennis (1994) and Dennis and Kinney (1998), this article argues that *media characteristics are the key influencers of media richness (and thus, of social presence).* This thought is also echoed by Kumar and Benbasat (2002), where they say that it can be reasonable to argue that a media being perceived as being high on the communication characteristics would result in a richer and more socially present media.

PROPOSITION DEVELOPMENT

This section develops the model and propositions. For the benefit of the reader, we present the entire model a priori in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Model of unethical communicative behavior
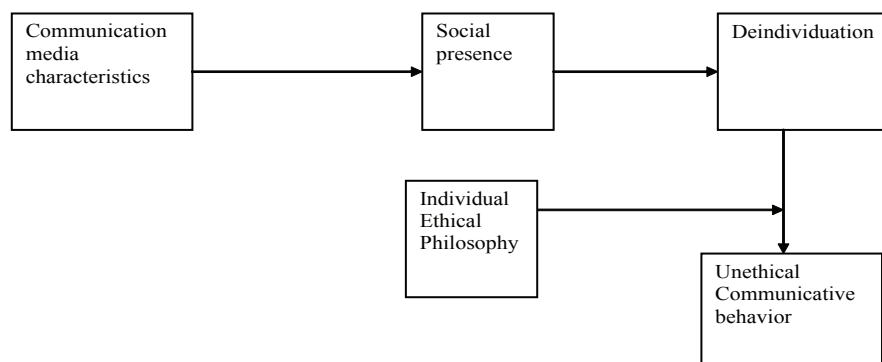
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