



Global Information Ethics: The Importance of Being Environmentally Earnest

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ABSTRACT

The article argues that Information Ethics (IE) can provide a successful approach for coping with the challenges posed by our increasingly globalized reality. After a brief review of some of the most fundamental transformations brought about by the phenomenon of globalization, the article distinguishes between two ways of understanding Global Information Ethics, as an ethics of global communication or as a global-information ethics. It is then argued that cross-cultural, successful interactions among micro and macro agents call for a high level of successful communication, that the latter requires a shared ontology friendly towards the implementation of moral actions, and that this is provided by IE. There follows a brief account of IE and of the ontic trust, the hypothetical pact between all agents and patients presupposed by IE.

Keywords: agents; contractualism; environmentalism; globalization; information ethics; patients

INTRODUCTION: FROM GLOBALIZATION TO INFORMATION ETHICS

Globalization is a phenomenon too complex even to sketch in this brief introduction.¹ So I hope that I shall be forgiven if I am rather casual about many features that would deserve full attention in another context. Here, I wish to highlight just six key transformations characterising the processes of globalization. I shall label them *contraction*, *expansion*, *porosity*, *hybridization*, *synchronization*, and *correlation*. They provide the essential background for making sense of the thesis developed in the rest of the article, which is that Information Ethics (IE)

can provide a successful approach for coping with the challenges posed by our increasingly globalized reality.

Contraction

The world has gone through alternating stages of globalization, growing and shrinking, for as long as humanity can remember. Here is a reminder:

In some respects the world economy was more integrated in the late 19th century than it is today. ... Capital markets, too, were well integrated. Only in the past few years, indeed, have international capital flows, relative to the size

of the world economy, recovered to the levels of the few decades before the first world war. (The Economist, 1997)

The truth is that, after each “globalization backlash” (think of the end of the Roman or British Empires), the world never really went back to its previous state. Rather, by moving two steps forward and one step back, sometime towards the end of the last century the process of globalization reached a point of no return. Today, revolutions or the collapse of empires can never shrink the world again, short of the complete unravelling of human life as we know it. Globalization is here to stay.

Globalization has become irreversible mainly thanks to radical changes in world-wide transport and communications (Brandt & Henning, 2002). Atoms and bytes have been moving increasingly rapidly, frequently, cheaply, reliably, and widely for the past 50 years or so. This dramatic acceleration has shortened the time required for any interactions: economic exchanges, financial transactions, social relations, information flows, movements of people, and so forth (Hodel, Holderegger & Lüthi, 1998). And this acceleration has meant a more condensed life and a contracted physical space. Ours is a smaller world, in which one may multitask fast enough to give and have the impression of leading parallel lives. We may regain a nineteenth-century sense of distance (space) and duration (time) only if one day we travel to Mars.

Expansion

Human space in the twenty-first century has not merely shrunk, though. ICTs have also created a new digital environment, which is constantly expanding and becoming progressively more diverse. Again, the origins of this global, transnational common space are old. They are to be found in the invention of recording and communication technologies that range from the alphabet to printing, from photography to television. But it is only in the last few decades that we have witnessed a vast and steady migration of human life to the other side of the screen.

When you ask, “Where were you?,” it is now normal and common to receive the answer “Online”. More than 6 million people throughout the world play *World of Warcraft*, currently the leading subscription-based MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing game, <http://www.blizzard.com/press/060119.shtml>). Globalization also means the emergence of this sort of single virtual space, sharable in principle by anyone, any time, anywhere.

Porosity

An important relation between our contracting physical space and our expanding, virtual environment is that of *porosity*. Imagine living as a flat figure on the surface of an endless cylinder. You could travel on the surface of the cylinder as a two-dimensional space, but not through it. So in order to reach any other point on the cylinder, the best you could do would be to follow the shortest path (geodesic) on the cylindrical surface. The empty space inside the cylinder would be inconceivable, as a third dimension would. Imagine now that the surface became porous and hence that a third dimension were added. The geodesics would be revolutionized, for you could travel through the vacuum encircled by the cylinder and reach the other side, thus significantly shortening your journeys. To use the rather apt vocabulary of surfing, you would be *tubing*: space would be curling over you, forming a “tube”, with you inside the cylindrical space. From a 2D perspective, you would literally come in and out of space. This sort of porosity characterizes the relation now between physical and virtual space. It is difficult to say where one is when one is “tubing”, but we know that we can travel through cyberspace to interact with other physical places in a way that would have been inconceivable only a few decades ago. Telepresence (Floridi, 2005) in our porous environment is an ordinary experience and this is also what globalization means.

Hybridization

During the last decade or so, we have become accustomed to conceptualize our life online as a mixture between an evolutionary adap-

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