

The Question of Ethics in Modern Technology

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Abstract: Technology is used without asking its many ethical implications. John Weckert says that humans are social mammals who need an environment to flourish. Man lives in two ecosystems – the natural environment and the social environment. For Weckert, human beings are technological creatures. Technology is developed at different levels to survive. But technology is not just an apparatus. It involves a complex social process in which human beings find themselves in with a sense of optimism. However, the reality of control and compliance is a matter of serious concern. This involves experiences inside the academe, the workplace, and the situation many women are subjected to. In the digital age, monitoring, surveillance, and the issue of privacy, remain a real problem. To survive in the digital age, Weckert believes that trust is crucial.

Keywords: *Ethics of technology; Trust; Monitoring and Surveillance; Gender; John Wecke*

Introduction

The concern with respect to monitoring and surveillance is serious insofar as it affects the work condition and human well-being. Miller and Weckert (2000, p.253) argue that “respecting the right to privacy of an individual is a fundamental moral obligation.” But the real issue is the reality of power-relation. When an employer possesses the capacity to monitor the employee’s emails, daily online activities, including one’s behavior in the workplace, then it can be said that the freedom of the latter is severely compromised. John Weckert believes that trust is critical in providing a sufficient philosophical account on the issue of privacy. Rogerson, Weckert & Simpson (2000), citing Gotterbam (1992), writes that “*professionals must be aware of their professional responsibilities, have available methods for resolving non-technical ethics questions and*

develop proactive skills to reduce the likelihood of ethical problems occurring.”

The workplace involves a natural environment as well as a social environment. This paper explores a vital issue that concerns everyday life and human relationships – trust. It seeks to understand what is at stake while going into the implication of the issue of trust as an aspect of ethics in the workplace. Apparently, when it comes to the academe, the physical environment is not much of an issue. The infrastructure of a university is not the source of the problem. But the social environment is different. It can be a cause for stress and the diminution of self-worth since hierarchical positions determine the working relationship of people. Monitoring can exacerbate the tension and conflict inside the institution. The question of ethics in modern technology, in this regard, is crucial. Miller and Weckert (2000, p.261) note that “*far from having the effect of ensuring that people do not make mistakes, intrusive and ongoing monitoring and surveillance might have the effect of causing employees to underperform because they are never allowed to take responsibility for outcomes.*”

Methodology

This paper uses the interpretive method to determine the crucial insights that are relevant to the issue that is being discussed. These insights may be drawn from personal experiences and observations of the authors as juxtaposed with the literature being used in the paper as it seeks to answer a basic question regarding the question of ethics in modern technology.

Theoretical Framework

Online platforms have improved the delivery of instruction in the academe. Many have discovered the value of online sources. Access to knowledge is critical. The availability of the internet means that access to world class journals and important researches has become easier. This has a tremendous impact in the explosion of knowledge and the collaboration between local and global scholars. However, context and culture also are a factor. The toxic environment in academia often affects the personal and social well-being of academicians. The internet has not improved in any way, for instance, the reality of women being subordinated to men in patriarchal cultures. In the Philippines, the “crab mentality” of people within the institution and the issue of favoritism undermine the intellectual development of individuals.

For Weckert, trust is an important element when working in the midst of the advances of modern technology. Weckert (2000) argues that “*it is difficult to have a well-functioning and happy community or workplace without a high level of trust. It is also difficult to have a high level of self-respect without the trust of others, and lack of trust in others indicates lack of respect for others.*” Trust is about how we value people. Social media is a huge factor when it comes to this. Recently, a university in the Philippines has proposed to punish students or employees who pose negative criticisms against the school or its administration. The stress experienced by both students and teachers may have contributed

to the unhealthy exchanges in social media, but the punitive approach of the school is less than helpful. Miller and Weckert (2000, p.262) think:

Universities, typically, allow their staff completely unfettered Internet access. Does the university then have a right to know how its employees are using this access? In general, it would seem not. From a privacy perspective, there is no problem with restricting access to certain sites by the use of software. Monitoring sites visited, however, is not such an acceptable way of restricting access.

When it comes to universities, the complex and difficult dynamics between those in the administration and the general faculty may be considered as the root cause of a toxic social environment. The problem is that those in positions of authority or power feel that sense of hubris and for this reason, they often underestimate their subordinates. This is especially true in a developing country like the Philippines where a colonial mentality still influences the attitude of people. A sense of elitism might give a higher authority a sense of intellectual supremacy over another. In this case, technology becomes an instrument in terms of intruding into the privacy of co-workers who might feel a lack of self-worth due to the uncomfortable experiences they are subjected to like being observed during classes or monitored while teaching online. Moor and Weckert (2004, p.306) say that “privacy and control is a subject of major concern that will need immediate and ongoing attention.”

At the time of the pandemic, important issues have emerged. This includes online security and monitoring, as well as the impact of the internet in the lives of people. Typically, the storage of data and personal information is at the heart of the issue when it comes to a person’s right to privacy. But a more ominous situation exists considering the dominant position of powerful individuals in the workplace. Data need to be secured in order to protect the identity

of employees and to protect the same from fraud. However, what is often not mentioned is the fact that a fundamental wrong is present. The micromanagement of those working in the academe results to the violation of one's academic freedom. As professionals, teachers deserve the trust and respect of their employer. But the dominant attitude of some administrators and senior faculty members can result to the exclusion of people. This unhealthy situation affects the social environment of human beings that in the end can curtail their creativity, personal growth, and their sense of happiness.

Discussion

Subtle Technological Domination

During the time of the pandemic, meetings, classes and seminars have been held online. Technology has allowed the continued interactions of people in the workplace, especially in the academe, by using ICT (Information and Communications Technology). Schools have invested in enhancing their connectivity and data capacity, which is also indicative of how educational institutions might be preparing for the future. But given the circumstances of some students and faculty, frustration comes from a lack of connectivity. This problem can be addressed by giving enough provisions to students and teachers alike, like gadgets and internet subsidies. However, the real problem lies elsewhere. The attitude of people has not changed, and as such, this results to tremendous pressure on the lives of individuals who are affected by stress.

As a way of contextualizing the work of Weckert on the ethics of technology, it can be argued that domination and other structural issues wrongly define the relationship among school authorities, teachers and students. Following the thought of Michel Foucault (1994), the same can be said to define what social and mental institutions are in terms of the use of rules and other mechanisms to discipline people. People do not trust each other because of the superficial culture that characterizes the interactions

of stakeholders in the institution. Some administrators hide under the veil of their authority and power. This results to the apparent alienation of marginal stakeholders who have no means to express themselves. In this case, precluding their ability to put their sentiments online is not only violative of their freedom of expression. It also contributes to the lack of trust within the institution. The right to self-expression is a fundamental human right. To preclude it is to undermine democracy in the workplace and society in general.

Why monitor employees? Miller and Weckert (2000, p.257) point out that *"it is often defended by employers, who argue that it is in the interests of all. Employees who are not performing well are weeded out. Those doing their job well can be rewarded on objective criteria."* Now, this is precisely where the problem lies. The point is that this type of mind-set results to intrusion and disrespect. Teachers are hired as professionals. There are specific qualifications and they also undergo strict vetting procedures before getting accepted. In this sense, the overlying idea is that the institution is supposed to trust this person on the basis of his or her academic merit and accomplishments.

On the part of students, the problem is that they are forced to study on their own using modules. But modules themselves do not teach. The teacher has to guide the student in order to learn. Learning is a process that requires paying attention to the development of the individual. The emphasis on self-learning is untenable because every student has a specific trait and not everyone possesses the same academic aptitude. In this way, it is worrisome at best that every child is expected to perform at a prescribed minimum level. To address this issue, institutions must determine who sets the criteria. There is no need to emphasize the fact that since the teacher is the one who makes the academic evaluation of students, the latter can feel the pressure. People must understand that even the Socratic method of questioning is undemocratic. Since the teacher is at the center of it,

the process can be intimidating for students. As such, this will hurt the growth of young people.

Technology would not be in the right direction if the unethical behavior of some persists. Online surveillance can be used to single out innocent people. In a way, the same panoptic device diminishes the value of work and shows a disrespect for the freedom of employees. While ICT helps in advancing education given the challenges from the pandemic, the problem is that uneven structures in the workplace and society in general have not been changed. The optimism we have with regard to the use of technology is overstated, Weckert thinks. The desired ends of education have not been achieved, to say the very least. The reason is simple. While the digital apparatus is innocent, the ways and means in the conduct of activities have remained centered on the demands of the curriculum and makes the welfare of the learner secondary. In the end, we are not really educating our children. We are simply reinforcing the latent force of elitism in society.

Technology and the Role of Women

Technology has certainly changed the way things are done, but only to a certain extent. When a failure in a routine occurs, oftentimes, technology becomes the scapegoat for the lapses of its user. Low bandwidth and outdated equipment take the blame for employees missing work deadlines or submitting mediocre output. While it takes responsibility off the person, it poses the problem of trust between the employee and the employer. For most women, this is not always the case. Their work superiors tend to reinforce the gender stereotype that women are typically less productive at work because of their commitment to their home and other family responsibilities. In this way, the career choice of a woman is subjected to socio-economic pressure, including the judgment of society.

There is also the issue of gender digital divide that highlights women's lack of access to technology

despite mobile phones and Internet connection becoming increasingly accessible today. Picot and Spath (2020) write that "*several studies on the role of women in the future of work have indicated that digital disruptions in the workplace will cast women aside.*" This reality motivated more women to equip themselves with upgraded technical skills, so that they can adapt to the new pace set by the digital age. Apparently, we disagree with the position of a local scholar that "too much talk is useless" (Joaquin 2016). Inclusion requires not only the practice of being open to the opinion of others, but also accepting pluralism in theorizing. Empowering women includes the recognition of the history and context of oppression in society.

When it comes to the social environment, what is unchanged during the time of the pandemic is the management's need to monitor the work behavior of their subordinates. Even with limited social interaction, workers still feel the specter of their employers hovering in their workspace because of the phenomenon called the Global Village, a term coined by Marshall McLuhan (1964). Modern innovations in technology, especially in ICT, make everything in the world interconnected. With the transition to an online platform, the working arrangement is meant to become more flexible. But the reality is that women have to deal with a host of issues that cannot be addressed by ICT. The problem is cultural. Weckert's body of work in the ethics of technology certainly would welcome the gender equality perspective.

While the way women are treated at work remains an issue, there is observable progress in this area. Mainstreaming gender equality has been institutionalized by means of law and policy. However, subordination is still apparent in the workplace and gender roles are determined by a patriarchy. Still, a host of issues need to be settled. Rights cannot be procured. They are inherent and as such, respect comes as some form of a moral demand. For example, women on maternity leave are driven to participate in work-related discussions online for fear of risking their chances to be promoted in the future.

Such is a clear manifestation of a lack of equality in the workplace. Despite maternity leave policies that protect their rights, women are still subjected to monitoring due to advances in ICT.

Modern Technology and Ethics

There is a bigger issue that Weckert seeks to address in his work. For instance, he asks, “should decisions be left to computers?” Development in Artificial Intelligence (AI) has a repercussion in the design of society. Social engineering at some stage means that somebody has to make a decision in terms of the important aspects of human life, including transport systems, communication systems, and industrial systems. Artificial Intelligence today determines the behavior of people online in the various facets of life. The technological reality is that AI influences the value choices of individuals. As machines and computers become smarter, people’s control of their everyday life becomes less and less significant.

Supercomputers push the limits of human intelligence. Robots now do the job in complex factories. New technology means innovation that changes the way we look at things. Progress is less and less ethical in the sense that what is given focus is the efficiency of technology. Weckert thinks that technology has helped human beings survive. Doing things have now become quicker. Technology in this respect is deterministic. The tool is a driver of values. In this way, consumption is driven by technological advances. Since capitalism controls the behavior of consumers, it influences the lifestyle of people. Miller and Weckert (2000, p.263) express the danger with monitoring: “*Suppose now that the university monitors lectures, not by having staff attend, but rather by secretly installing cameras and microphones. The analogy here is closer, but the monitoring does not seem so benign.*”

Understandably, the idea of efficiency also impacts our educational systems. Students are expected to be productive. They become, in this

regard, agents of globalization. Western values and culture permeate the sense of the good of students. This observation is simply consistent with Herbert Marcuse’s (1964) critique against industrial society. Modern man has become subservient to instruments. The internet controls young people and defines the life they so desire (Maboloc 2017). Young people manage their lives around their computers, mobile phones, or social media. Thus, the ethical aspect of human existence is becoming irrelevant when it comes to decision-making processes. Man is under the sway of technological progress. Consider, for example, the possibility of nanotechnology infringing on the privacy of people in which Moor and Weckert (2004, p.306) say:

Now imagine that in our world of shrinking privacy we add nanotechnology. We will construct nanoscale information gathering systems. It will become extremely easy to put a nanoscale transmitter in a room or onto someone’s clothing so that he or she will have no idea the device is present or that he or she is being monitored and tracked. Nanotechnology will make it easier for us to wear cameras invisible to others that can keep detailed movies of what transpires. It will make it easier to tap phone lines in ways that are virtually undetectable. It may become depressingly difficult to keep any secrets or live a life at a reasonable level of solitude.

Richard Feynman first expressed the possibility of super-small computers. Eric Drexler (1986) has enumerated many of these things that act as molecular assemblers that will try to fix what is wrong inside the human body. This form of a technological fix will hopefully make possible those types of operations meant to correct anomalies at a level that only tiny machines may be able to manipulate. But even with this optimism, problems still persist given the technological gap between affluent and poor countries, which means that such cutting-edge science can only be available to wealthy people.

(Maboloc 2021) This can severely impact the disparity in human well-being.

Use of Technology during the Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented impact in the lives of the people globally. To manage the population, the Philippine Government imposed lockdowns since March 12, 2020, alternating between what it calls an Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) and General Community Quarantine (GCQ). To nuance the imposed lockdowns, a modified classification is given. But the enforcement of lockdowns has been questioned on the basis of the principle of autonomy. The argument of critics is that lockdowns prevent the movement of people and so it curtails their freedom. The only way out, in terms of the psychological impact of the lockdowns, are access to online or virtual technologies for people to continue to connect with each other.

The implications during lockdowns include the fact that the majority of the population will not be able to go to work and schools have to resort to online modular learning. The internet, in this regard, has become indispensable. At the start of the pandemic, people were given food rations and medicine passes during ECQs which means that they can only go out on alternate days. But lockdowns cause stress. For this reason, the internet cannot be seen as the solution to the problems of people who feel imprisoned inside their homes. In addition, risks have persisted. Precaution is necessary since exposure to online technology means the possibility of being abused online aside from the potential risks from hacking, phishing, or violations of the right to privacy.

Nevertheless, the value of online technology is apparent. It matters, though, to look into the effects of lockdowns. What is the impact of these lockdowns to the economy? Employment wise, the policy of the government that prescribes restaurants, airports, seaports, public transport, sports venues, among others to operate only at 25% of capacity meant

closures of businesses and thus, the loss of income on workers and industries. Due to the above situation, the Philippines has an economic contraction of 9.5% in 2020, the highest among members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. As a result of the lockdowns, millions of Filipinos have suffered. One of the mitigating factors, in terms of the effects of the pandemic, is the use of online systems and technology in the area of education, commerce, health care, and entertainment, to name a few. It cannot be the real solution to the problem, however. Although people might insist on their freedom of mobility, the strict enforcement of rules and protocols of the government is based on the idea of protecting oneself, one's family and the community as a whole, is to the best interest of the public.

The question of the good life has a transdisciplinary aspect which means that modern technology must be ethical to be able to truly respond to human need. (Maboloc 2021) Weckert's body of work warns us that progress cannot proceed in the ideal sense without ethics. The rights of women, for instance, should be respected. The radical prognosis when it comes to modern technology is two-way: positively, technology has helped in advancing human progress and survival both in his natural and social environment and negatively, the dangers remain if trust is disregarded as people move into more advanced types of interactions that are propelled by technological innovation. But online technology is crucial. Without it, there would not have been a way to overcome the effects of the pandemic. But there are limits. Ethics, in this way, is operative. Without it, technology can be abused. In the end, in the use of modern technology, the pursuit of the good life must characterize its ultimate goal.

Conclusion:

This paper pursues the question of ethics in the workplace. However, it has also shown the tremendous impact of the transition to the digital environment when it comes to the issue of trust. The idea of monitoring and surveillance have a huge

implication as regard to the nature and character of the working environment. The paper emphasizes the importance of understanding the effects of a toxic relationship that comes as a result of the lack of trust. Institutions should cease to be a panoptic device that controls people. The freedom of people must be respected since it is only by means of such that a healthy social environment can be created in the workplace. The same observation should be considered when it comes to society in general.

Modern technology has a big influence in our everyday life. It should therefore be used as a tool to improve the human condition. Artificial intelligence is a good development but what we must not forget is the value of people and the relationships that we create in the workplace. Any tool for that matter only has an instrumental value. The human aspect of work, the importance of trust and respect for the freedom of others, will always be crucial in how we create that social and cultural environment that leads to the good life. In this respect, trust implies that we value human beings, their judgments, and the common interests that we have in terms of realizing the good of society.

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