Chapter Four

Ethical Dimension of the Information Society: Implications for Africa

Stephen M. Mutula
School of Social Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, SA

1. Introduction

Information Ethics (IE) concerns the responsible use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the Information Society as enunciated by the World Summit of Information Society Action Line C10 (WSIS, 2005). The Internet, social media, computers and associated applications, such as e-Government and social networking, are having a tremendous impact on society. The laggard technological adoption behaviour that has characterised Africa and its people for many years is gradually being overcome in the wake of new technologies. New information and communication technologies have quickly gained acceptance and use in education, research, business, government, politics, professional practice and in the general society, which raises several ethical issues such as: protection of users’ rights; user privacy guarantees; methods of enforcing compliance with the policies; user compensation when rights are violated; sanctions for errant users; verification of the credibility of information uploaded by users; methods of conflict resolutions; roles and responsibilities of users; dealing with cybercrime; user training; dealing with intellectual property rights; guarding servers against invasion and more. In Africa, cultural practices form part of the daily norms of the people and, consequently, the ethical issues concerned with the use of new technologies can never be over emphasised. In addition, Africa is endowed with people of diverse and heterogeneous norms, cultures, languages, religions, and governance systems that answer to different ethical and moral interpretations. This environment has created increased concerns about the moral and ethical implications for society, especially with regard to people’s legitimate rights. This chapter provides an attempt to address the responsible use of ICTs in the Information Society.

Velasquez, Andre, Shanks, and Meyer (2010) state that ethics is not about somebody’s feelings, one’s religious beliefs, or doing what the law requires, or the standards of behaviour our society accepts. Instead, ethics refers to wellfounded standards of right and wrong that prescribe what humans ought to do, usually in terms of rights, obligations, benefits to society, fairness, or specific virtues. In this regard, ethics implies those standards that impose the reasonable obligations to refrain from rape, stealing, murder, assault, slander, and fraud. In addition, ethical standards support virtues of honesty, compassion, and loyalty; and the right to life, the right to freedom from injury, and the right to privacy. Fallis (2007) explains that the concept of ethics means distinguishing right actions from wrong actions based on the premise that [right actions] have better outcomes. However, Fallis is quick to point out that there are ethical duties that human beings must obey, regardless of the outcomes. The right thing to do is determined by the rights that human beings have, such as the universal human rights or the commonly held value system of persons, despite different moral or cultural backgrounds and inclinations. Carbo (2007) asserts that ethical conduct dictates that individuals should be treated with love, affection, kindness, gentleness, generosity of spirit, and warm-heartedness.

While ethics is a concept that has come of age, Information Ethics is fairly new in literature, having gained prominence after the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) in 2003 and 2005, respectively, as articulated in Action Line C10 of the Plan of Action (WSIS, 2005).
By definition, Information Ethics may be perceived as a branch of ethics which Chuang and Chen (1999) consider being a much larger philosophy known as social ethics. They consequently define Information Ethics as a discipline dealing with the moral conduct of information users with respect to their responsibility. The WSIS Action Line C10 focuses on the ethical dimensions of the Information Society. This Action Line holds that the Information Society should be subject to universally held values and promote the common good, while preventing abusive uses of ICTs. Furthermore, the Information Society should take steps to promote respect for peace and to uphold the fundamental values of freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, shared responsibility, and respect for nature. In addition, all actors in the Information Society should promote the common good, protect privacy and personal data and take appropriate actions and preventive measures, as determined by law, against abusive uses of ICTs for illegal and other acts such as racism; racial discrimination; xenophobia and related intolerance; hatred; violence; all forms of child abuse, including paedophilia and child pornography; and trafficking in, and exploitation of human beings (WSIS, 2005). Action Line C8 of the WSIS Action Plan is also relevant, especially for Africa, as it focuses on cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity, local content, traditions and religions. It also advocates for policies that support the respect, preservation, promotion and enhancement of cultural heritage as well as diverse forms of digital and traditional media (WSIS, 2005).

2. **Responsible use of ICTs in the Information Society**

Capurro (2008) underscores the value of Information Ethics in the Information Society in upholding the fundamental values of freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, shared responsibility, respect for nature, peace, justice, dignity of human persons, and respect for human rights. He also highlights the importance of fundamental freedoms of others including: personal privacy, the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, in conformity with relevant international instruments, and in ensuring that all actors in the Information Society take appropriate measures, as determined by the law, against abusive uses of ICT. Chuang and Chen (1999) note that the use of computers has created new problems, involving cybercrime, unlawful acquisitions of private information and hacking, that must be addressed.

The abusive use of new technologies has increased with the rapid spread of mobile phones and social media worldwide, in general, and in Africa in particular, more than any other technologies, such as radio, television, Internet and computers, have in the past. The rapid spread of social media, for example, has raised several questions regarding the protection of legitimate rights of the users. There are fears that information uploaded by users into social media networks will be passed onto other sources by service providers without their consent. Besides, there have been attempts by overzealous governments and organisations to restrict access to social media, especially when they believe such new ICTs are being used for political agitation against governments in power, as it happened during the Arab Spring. Rice (2011b) writes about other attempts to gag freedom of expression through a draft social-media policy at Sam Houston State University that was intended to force students with a campus-related Twitter, Facebook, or other online account to give university administrators editing privileges. Elsewhere, Egyptian government officials in 2008 beat Ahmed Maher Ibrahim, a 27-year-old civil engineer, for using Facebook to support calls for a general strike on May 4 – President Mubarak’s 80th birthday. Lundsay (2010) therefore says new technologies, especially social media, if not well managed, open the door to numerous risks such as the breach of confidentiality, conflicts of interest, and misuse of organisational resources.

Late in 2011, the Hacktivist Group Anonymous threatened an imminent attack to bring down Facebook. Hacktivists, who are ardent supporters of WikiLeaks, were targeting Facebook because the social network has often been at the centre of privacy concerns regarding its users’ information. Hacktivist Group Anonymous, in a decoded voice in a YouTube video, noted that “everything you do
on Facebook stays on Facebook, regardless of your privacy settings and deleting your account is impossible, changing the privacy settings to make your Facebook account more private is a delusion [...] (Arico, 2011).

The issue of breach of privacy in online environments seems pervasive. Daily Nation (2012) carried an article saying that companies that make many of the most popular Smartphone applications for Apple and Android devices routinely gathered the information in personal address books on the phone and, in some cases, stored it on their own computers and then transmitted it without the knowledge of the owners of such information. Facebook, Twitter, Foursquare, Instagram and others were reported to upload either users’ contact phone numbers or e-mail addresses to their servers for matching purposes. These applications often perform this action without seeking permission or informing the owner how long they plan to store this data. In 2012, the Path iPhone App users were surprised to learn that the address books contacts of their e-mail addresses and phone numbers had been uploaded to and stored on Path’s servers. Moreover, Google announced plans to review its privacy policy that would legitimize releasing information of its clients to third parties without their [clients’] consent (Google, 2012).

Currently, Africa has the fastest mobile phone growth rate in the world and there is also a proliferation of social media users. However, the institutional capacity for African governments to guarantee citizens’ legitimate rights relating to ethics and morality in their interactions with others using new and emerging technologies, such as social media, seems neither to exist nor is it prioritised. Mason (1986) raises several ethical issues in the electronic age, which include privacy; accuracy; accountability for errors in information; how the injured party can be made whole; intellectual property; ownership of the channels through which information is transmitted; and accessibility. New information technologies, such as social media, largely rely on the trust of the users for compliance with the provisions of the user policy. Trust is a critical dimension of ethics with an interdisciplinary origin, including (but not limited to) management (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002) and information systems (Salo & Karjaluoto, 2007; Lee, 2005 and Shao, Ma & Meng, 2005). Easton (1965) explains that the presence of trust means that members will feel their own interests would be attended to even if the authorities were under little supervision or scrutiny. Besides, the ability to trust others and sustain cooperative relations is the product of social experiences and socialisation.

3. Social media penetration and uptake

The social media deserve special attention in the Information Society for two main reasons: 1) the use of social media is the fastest growing online activity worldwide; 2) it has had the most significant impact, in the shortest possible time, among people of diverse professions, ages and genders. Weiss (2008) observes that the social media are a global phenomenon happening in all markets, regardless of wider economic, social and cultural development. The growth areas of the social media, the world over, are in video clips (83%); social networks (57%) and the widget economy (23%) (social network users with installed applications); and the blogging community (42 milion bloggers) (Smith, 2011). With regard to individual social network usage, Facebook was, in 2011, rated as the most popular social networking space with an estimated 55 0750 million unique monthly visitors (eBizMBA, 2011; Arico, 2011). Moreover, the largest demographic group on Facebook was the age group 35 to 54, followed by the 18 to 24-year-olds (Y & Z generation respectively) (Corbet, 2010).

In South Africa, MXit and Facebook in 2011 led the way in user numbers, followed by Twitter and BlackBerry Messenger. A social media 2011 survey found that there were about 3.4 million users online using Facebook in South Africa. This number translates to 64% of the online population Facebook users in South Africa (Socialmedia blog, 2012). Onyango (2012), citing results from a survey of Twitter users in Africa, found that Kenyans are the second highest users of Twitter in Africa,
surpassing countries in the Maghreb that had used the facility to stage political revolt. Kenyans were ranked behind South Africans, but tweeted more than Nigerians, Egyptians and Morrocans, despite having a lesser population. The survey found that 60% of those who tweet are aged between 20 and 29 years. The study also found that 57% of these tweets are from mobile devices and are driving the growth of social media in Africa.

Social media activity that started on intranets and private networks has since evolved to become a web-based social networking tool. The social media platforms are proliferating and include, among others, MySpace, Twitter, Skype, LinkedIn, Google+ and Facebook. Social media are used for interaction, enabling users to add friends, comment on profiles, join groups and have discussions. Photo and video supporting social networks include, among others, YouTube and Flickr. They enable users to share and comment on other users’ submissions. On the other hand, Wikis, such as Wikipedia, support social interactions by enabling users to add and edit existing articles. Most social media service providers are based in Europe and North America and are subject to the legal framework of those jurisdictions with regard to the legitimate rights of users.

Lindsay (2010) observes that though the social media are relatively new compared to cell phones, using social media is now the number one online activity, with its use accounting for 10% of all users’ time on the Internet. In addition, social media use is growing three times faster than the Internet’s overall growth rate. The factors driving social media proliferation need not be over emphasised. Expectations and user online behaviour is rapidly changing, with people existing in the world of instant, real-time communication, where immediate access to partners, customers and information is now the norm. Mathen (2012) observes that today’s employees create and receive information from a host of different sources and formats that cannot be met by typical corporate intranets. Furthermore, since organisations house the data people require, their network capabilities fall short of supporting new work environments and working styles. Besides, with globalisation, employees now routinely work with people outside their territories and different business units.

The rapid penetration and use of the social media is also being driven by the rise of affordable handsets and broadband connectivity. Farmington (2012) notes that the availability of cost-effective mobile and wireless solutions and the greater demand for access to the social media platforms are becoming the most important factors driving the rapid growth of the media. Chauke (2012) supports this assertion by arguing that more people are now connected to the Internet through their cell phones than through computers. Gosier (2008) notes that mobile phone penetration is higher in Africa than in any other region in the world, providing an enhanced environment for the growth of social media. Mathen (2012), citing a social media report from Portland Communications (USA), notes that Africa has 48 million social media users distributed as follows: 30 million on Facebook, 6 million on LinkedIn and 12 million on Twitter. Moreover, in 2011, the number of Facebook users in Africa exceeded the use of this medium in Eastern Europe and, for this reason, Facebook enabled a Swahili language version, while Hausa and Zulu versions were in the review process (Viralblog.com, 2009).

The impressive growth of social media in Africa, compared to the broadband and e-Government innovations, is evident in the relative positions of the South African Development Community (SADC) in the world ranking, which show that South Africa, which is ranked 23rd in social media global penetration, was ranked 91st in the Digital Opportunity Index in 2006 and this position has not significantly changed. The Digital Opportunity Index (DOI) is used to measure and evaluate the opportunity, infrastructure and utilisation of ICTs by government and its people. DOI monitors recent technologies such as broadband and mobile Internet access, the falling price of broadband, and increasing broadband speeds (World Information Society Report, 2006).

Since the social media have evolved into a global phenomenon, they have progressively been adopted by people of all ages and persuasions. The fast acceptance of social media is, in part, fuelled by the fact that traditional collaborative technologies such as e-mail and telephone, which are largely text and document-centric, have become increasingly less efficient to drive innovation and productivity
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(Mathen, 2012). Social media is being applied in business as a new competitive tool with companies adopting social software as a strategic part of their IT investment to improve business collaboration. Companies have also embraced social software to bring about integration of disparate organisational units and to create a workforce free of geographic constraints. Mathen (2012) is of the view that businesses are using social media to facilitate more customer interaction, as well as for marketing purposes.

4. **Social media use in society**

Ngetich (2011) observes that many people use social media to contact their friends using e-mails, while others use it to chat. At places of work, social media are reportedly being used to cut phone bills by chatting and getting news updates on the outside world. Besides communication and sharing of information on various issues, including jobs, social media enable people to market their products. Bob Collymore, an ardent user of social media and the chief executive of Safaricom (the market leader mobile service provider in Kenya), says "social media is a place for people to tell you what’s good and what’s bad about what you are doing as well as a place for people to vent their frustrations". Collymore further says people join social media for three reasons, 1) for identity; 2) to get connections and 3) to socialise within a community. He says people have secured jobs and others lost theirs on social media. Moreover, a number of individuals in the private sector and government are turning to social media platforms to promote their brand.

5. **Social media use in education**

Rice (2011) points out that in education, college students in the United States are taking social media to a new level by using websites like Facebook to communicate with other students about their coursework. In a survey, nine out of ten college students said they use Facebook for social purposes, like writing status updates and posting pictures. The majority, 58%, said they feel comfortable using it to connect with other students to discuss homework assignments and exams. More than 30% of students said they use sites such as Twitter, MySpace, LinkedIn, and Google+. Nearly a quarter of students reported using social studying sites, such as CourseHero and GradeGuru, and 11% said they wish instructors would incorporate these sites into the curriculum more often.

Social media has also great potential as a delivery conduit for Massive Online open Courses (MOOC) or Massive Online Crash Courses (MOCC) that are increasingly being offered by many leading universities especially in North America and Europe. McAuley, Steward, Siemens and Cormie (2012) define MOOC as “an online phenomenon integrating the connectivity of social networking, the facilitation of an acknowledged expert in a field of study and a collection of freely accessible online resources”.

The Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) phenomenon is leveraging the development of new social software and Internet technologies. Zhu (2012) observes that MOOC in the past year has emerged to be a major trend in education space, witnessed by the rapid take-off of online universities such as Stanford on one hand and Harvard, MIT and Berkeley on another. These courses are being offered on such platforms as EdX, Coursera and Udacity. Stanford Report (2012) announced that the University would offer 16 online courses on three platforms (Class2Go, Venture Lab and Coursera) for the fall quarter. During the spring, Venture Lab platform hosted 37,000 students for the Technology Entrepreneurship course while another 29,000 students were hosted on Coursera in the Writing in the Sciences course. The courses being offered as MOOC virtually for free include among others computer science, finance, mathematics, linguistics, science writing, sociology, engineering and education. Each of the platforms has peculiar features and pedagogies and capabilities that include video lectures, discussion forums, peer assessment, problem sets, quizzes and team projects.
The University of Manitoba in Canada is credited to have been the first to offer MOOC to 24 credit students and 2,200 non-credit students in 2008, but Stanford University in 2011 surpassed expectations when it offered a free online course on artificial intelligence to 160,000 students across all countries except North Korea (Mail & Guardian, 2012).

The MOOC offering has both positive and negative ethical implications. On the positive side, MOOC create opportunities to enhance access and participation in higher education among the many students who are normally excluded from mainstream higher education by the inflexible campus model universities and the high cost of tuition associated with them. All the work within the MOOC courses (readings, discussions, and repurposing of material) is shared with everyone else. The idea is that the more you engage with the courses with other participants, and with distributed content, the more you will learn. The MOOC model universities free up resources and require fewer lecturers. The MOOC provides a way for universities to increase their intake in degree courses to help meet their widening participation obligations.

On the negative side, it is claimed completion rates in MOOC are poor compared to traditional universities (Mail & Guardian, 2012). For example, of the 160,000 that were enrolled in the artificial intelligence course at Stanford University in 2011, only 23,000 completed successfully. MOOCs raise issues of credibility due to lack of real-world interactions between professors and students. For example, how does one engage with a lecturer in a class of thousands of students? Those who offer to pay for the courses are given meetings with facilitators, a privilege which non-credit students do not enjoy (McAuley et al., 2012). Besides, though MOOCs are free for non-credit purposes, tuition is charged for students taking them for credit. The ownership of the content created by learners in MOOC environments remains unclear, yet this has intellectual property implications. Largely, MOOC programmes along with pedagogies have been developed in the Western universities. The implications for relevancy in a developing country context cannot be wished away. The need to tailor-make curricula to address the peculiarities of developing countries in terms of ICT infrastructure, access to digital networks, digital literacy, and more should form part of the African scholarly endeavour.

Moreover, MOOC offerings presuppose access to electronic resources such as e-books and electronic journals. However, while electronic journal infrastructure has in recent years improved in developing countries, the e-book industry is not well developed. For example, in South Africa, the Publishers Association of South Africa estimates that e-books constitute about 1.5% of the overall book market in the country (Jones, 2011). Besides, the contribution of e-books to revenue is even less considering that online e-books retail at less than 50% of the price of the traditional print books (Jones, 2011). Besides, a lack of standardisation of metadata makes access to e-books difficult (Jones, 2011). E-books are also criticised for poor onscreen presentation, restrictive licensing, high cost and the limited range of titles offered. This is exacerbated by the fact that because of the need for more licences at peak hours, often the number of titles for access is limited. In addition, during peak hours, users are often turned away. For these reasons, the uptake of e-books is quite low (Cox, 2004) and incapable of sustaining MOOC model universities especially in developing countries, the majority of which are in Africa.

6. Social media use in politics and government

Social media has become an important agent for social, economic and political transformation, especially in developing countries. Social media is finding increasing use in politics and government among other sectors. The Ghanaian government is one of the pioneers in Africa to utilise social networking tools such as Facebook and YouTube to offer services at its Ministry of Information. Onyango (2011), citing the Twitter Survey in Africa, found that several Kenyan political leaders have set up social media accounts to ‘woo’ voters in preparation for the next (2013) general election.
7. Ethics and social media

Social media providers expect users of their services to adhere to some basic standards of ethical behaviour, but the mechanisms for enforcing compliance remain weak. For example, Facebook has a Statement of Rights and Responsibilities and a user privacy policy that governs their relationship with users and others who interact with their social media platform. The privacy policy provides guidelines of how interaction with others takes place and how Facebook collects and uses clients’ content. The content owner is required to grant Facebook exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free, worldwide licence to use the content (Facebook, 2012). This intellectual property licence, in theory, ends when a client deletes the content or the account, unless the content has been shared with others, and they have not deleted it. However, in practice, removed content may still exist in backup copies for some time, while not being made available for access. Consequently, once information is out of the hands of the contributor, there is limited guarantee that even if it is deleted from the contributor’s account, the information becomes permanently unavailable because it is likely to have been accessed by other users who would still be keeping it.

Facebook says it relies on client trust and goodwill in an attempt to protect other people’s rights and to enhance safety (Facebook, 2012). Furthermore, Facebook in its user policy says it does not allow the under 13 age groups or sex offender convicts to use their services. However, there are no explicit ways of ensuring only legitimate users register to use their platform. In addition, Facebook has no way of verifying the integrity, honesty, reliability or accuracy of the information they receive from users (Facebook, 2012). This also applies to Twitter, which does not require e-mail verification or identity authentication (Twitter, 2012). Generally, the user policy guidelines of major social media platforms explicitly indemnify service providers from liability in the event of any litigation arising out of breach of rights of their users or other parties. For example, Facebook’s user policy says “[…] If anyone brings a claim against us related to your actions, content or information, you will indemnify and hold us harmless from and against all damages, losses, and expenses of any kind (including reasonable legal fees and costs) related to such a claim” (Facebook, 2012). Facebook’s user policy also says there are no guarantees for the service providers to ensure strict compliance with ethical provisions, either through policy or technological interventions. In this respect, Facebook is explicit that “[w]e do our best to keep Facebook safe, but we cannot guarantee […] [o]ur platform is bug free, safe, and secure” (Facebook, 2012).

In contrast, most Twitter profile information is public, so anyone can see it. According to Twitter (2012), non-public information about its users is only released as lawfully required by appropriate legal processes such as a subpoena, court order, or other valid legal processes. Twitter acknowledges that the information they store from users may not be accurate. LinkedIn (2012), in contrast, states that the information the client provides is used to create and distribute advertising relevant to the [client's] LinkedIn experience. Moreover, the responsibility for compliance with all these provisions is left solely to the user. LinkedIn’s policy acknowledges that whereas personal information the user provides will be secured in accordance with industry standards and technology, the Internet is not a 100% secure environment, consequently there is no guarantee that information may not be accessed, copied, disclosed, altered, or destroyed by breach of any of their physical, technical, or managerial safeguards. The YouTube Team (2012), on the other hand, states that every community that features on its platform involves a certain level of trust. The customer is therefore expected to be responsible as millions of users respect that trust. The policy advises users to know that YouTube works closely with law enforcement agencies.
8. Gaps in social media user policies

The social media environment reviewed reveals several gaps that leave room for infringements on users’ legitimate rights, as a result of service providers’ inaction, technological inefficiencies, predatory behaviour, lack of government policy intervention, exclusive rights of social media service providers, user abuses or users’ outright criminal behaviour. The following acts of commission and/or omission within social media environments should be of ethical and moral concern:

- All social media platforms rely on user trust to achieve compliance with policy provisions.
- Users have no say in policy-making processes that affect their interactions in social media environments.
- There are hardly any government policy interventions with regard to social media, especially in the developing world.
- No provision is made by service providers for compensation when users’ rights are violated.
- LinkedIn acknowledges that prevention of illegitimate access, copying, alteration of users’ information cannot be guaranteed. It also tracks its clients’ activities and uses clients’ information for advertisements.
- All social media service providers require users to indemnify them from any liability arising from use of their platforms.
- All social media service providers are required by law to disclose clients’ information should a court of law request such information.
- None of the social media service providers have any effective means of verifying the integrity, reliability, accuracy and authenticity of information provided by clients.
- Clients’ information is still held for some time with servers of service providers after users have deregistered their membership.

The preceding analysis of the social media use policies reveals that users have limited protection of their rights while interacting in a social media environment. Collymore says no-one is safe on social media because some people use it to spread rumours, release naked pictures, or just poke fun at a celebrity. Lundsay (2010) observes that social media can be misused in many ways, such as wasted work time; misuse of company resources; risk to company computer systems, network or data; disclosure of confidential or other non-public information; disparagement or harassment; conflicts of interest; espionage or fraud; privacy and damage of personal reputation.

9. Ethics of social media use in politics and government

The increasing use of social media in politics and government is raising a number of ethical and moral issues that need to be addressed. The release of WikiLeaks by Julian Assange, the founder, in 2010 raised animated debates and criticism in equal measure for revealing sensitive information such as reports about war in Iraq and classified US military information. The US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton called the release of US secret reports on the war in Iraq an attack on US foreign policy interests and the international community (National Public Radio, 2010). The US Attorney General Eric Holder announced an ongoing criminal investigation into the leaks and those responsible. WikiLeaks called its revelation public disclosure (whistle-blowing), arguing that the public has a right to know what its government is doing. Those against WikiLeaks aver that secrecy is not a bad thing since releasing secrets puts lives at risk, while others think the ethics of revealing secrets lies in the nature of what is being revealed (Radford, 2010; Somerville, 2010). The debate about the ethics of WikiLeaks is so complex that it would distract the focus of this article to be covered in depth. There is
perhaps a need to revert to the fundamentals of ethical theories to help provide a systematic approach and understanding the debates surrounding WikiLeaks.

10. Ethical dimension of Information Society: Implications for Africa

Africa has unique challenges of an ethical nature in the Information Society. Capurro (2010) observes that ethics, in general, and Information Ethics in particular, is a young academic field in Africa. He attributes this to the fact that not much has been published on the role that African philosophy can play in thinking about the challenges arising from the impact of ICTs on African societies and cultures. Capurro (2008) further points out that because ubuntu principles have underpinned the African Renaissance, Black Economic Empowerment, corporate governance and conflict resolution, similar principles or philosophies should be foundational to the African ethical and moral traditions. The widely used Eurocentric ethical traditions such as consequentialism, deontology and virtue-based theories do not sit well with African traditions. Ocholla (2011) explains that consequentialism emphasises outcomes, while duty-based theories or deontology emphasises rules. Virtue-based theories, on the other hand, place emphasis on the character of the personal moral agent. The dominance and use of Eurocentric ethical traditions in studying African philosophy is being challenged by African scholars who realise that African ethical and moral traditions cannot adequately be investigated or studied through an exotic lens.

The quest for harnessing Information Ethics tradition in Africa is gathering pace catalysed by the WSIS Action Line C10. However, the technological revolution brought by mobile communication and now social media, is taking place in an environment where there is little integration of Information Ethics in the education curriculum (Mutula & Braman, 2011). Conway (n.d.) observes that the field of scholarship and teaching of Information Ethics is concentrated in developed economies such as Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States, with Africa lagging behind. The laggard position of Africa with regard to Information Ethics has caused African scholars to make proactive attempts to infuse Information Ethics in the education curriculum, especially at the university level. Besides Information Ethics, ethical aspects of e-Government in Africa have been extensively discussed by African scholars and recommendations have been made to national government for action. The first African Conference on Information Ethics was held in February 2007 in Tshwane, South Africa, to discuss the impact of the use of modern Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) on the African continent. This was followed by the high-level Workshop on Ethics and e-Government in February 2009 that was held in Pretoria and addressed, among other subjects, global perspectives of Information Ethics with regard to transparency, secrecy, trust, rights, responsibilities, and accountability. The third Information Ethics forum followed and was held at the University of Botswana in September 2010, resulting in the development of an Information Ethics tool kit for the Information Ethics curriculum. The fourth forum of Information Ethics in Africa was held in September 2011 at the University of Pretoria focusing on generating an Information Ethics curriculum for undergraduate study at the university (Mutula, 2011). The fifth workshop on Information Ethics focusing on social media was held in Nairobi, Kenya, on 3 June 2012. The sixth conference followed on 3 - 7 September 2012 at Kievlits Kroon Conference Centre, Pretoria, which further elaborated on the responsible use of social media in Africa.

Despite the current efforts to institutionalise Information Ethics in Africa, there is also a raging debate about the prudence of focusing on ‘African Information Ethics’ and/or ‘Information Ethics for Africa’. Ocholla (2011) poses the question: “Should African Information Ethics be unique”? In contrast, Gordana and Hofkirchner (2011) ask: “Are computing ethics issues unique or are they simply moral issues that happen to involve ICT?” Carbo (n.d.) asserts that each individual belongs to a number of different cultures at different levels, such as living in one country; speaking different languages; and
adhering to policies and practices of different religions and political parties. Gorniak-Kocikowska (1996) argues that the diverse ethical systems embedded in other cultures of the world all derive from local histories and customs and are unlikely to be applicable worldwide. Mason (1986), while underscoring the importance of intellectual property, regrets that current protocols regarding legitimate rights of the people have not effectively espoused indigenous knowledge. Hoesle (1992) states that computerised information systems’ use requires people to act and think in prescribed ways that privilege Western cultural traditions because of the origin of computers in these cultures, while marginalising the cultural traditions of others. Capurro (2010) observes that sensitivity to a diversity of cultural traditions and local contexts is needed when considering the impact of ICTs.

Floridi (1999) points out that the Information Ethics theory of ‘macro-ethics’ was designed to address all ethical situations in all traditions. Floridi’s argument is that everything which exists can be described as an information object and that all information objects have intrinsic value and therefore deserve moral respect (Brey, 2008). However, this viewpoint has been criticised because since people do not normally seem to assign intrinsic value to information objects, strong arguments must be adduced for us to start valuing them as such (Brey, 2008). Besides, Floridi fails to provide an objectivist ontology for information objects’ properties because, as Brey (2008) points out, such information properties must be inalienable and not subjective and contingent. Floridi’s macro-ethics therefore falls short of a universalist theory and is not suitable in explaining and studying ‘African Information Ethics’.

Therefore, current efforts by African scholars to entrench Information Ethics in the education curriculum, founded on African traditions, are well intentioned and could go a long way in re/validating indigenous ways of thinking which, hitherto, have been overshadowed by the continent’s colonial past and Eurocentric or Western ethical traditions such as that of Floridi. Through the ongoing debate on ‘African Information Ethics’ and/or ‘Information Ethics for Africa’, African scholarship has a unique opportunity to solidify a knowledge system based on African realities in the Information Society. However, the aim should not be to isolate African values from the global culture, but rather to develop Information Ethics models that have wider applicability and validity beyond national, regional and continental boundaries. The Information Ethics models for Africa should be founded on African values but remain alive to the diversity of African culture, individual country needs and the international sensitivities.

The peculiarity of Africa in the Information Society with regard to the ethical concerns and issues raised in this chapter about the responsible use of social media platforms requires multipronged interventions. Africa is vulnerable to ethical and moral breaches with regard to the use of ICTs, in general, and social media in particular, because of its diverse cultures, languages and people; the novelty of emerging information and communication technologies; and poorly developed technology and policy infrastructures. During the official opening of the second Information Ethics Conference in Gaborone, Botswana, on 6 September 2010, the Minister for Transport and Communication, Hon. Frank Ramsden, urged the participants to interrogate policy and infrastructure concerns facing the African continent. In particular, he highlighted policy issues facing national governments in Africa in achieving universal access to digital networks and computing technologies and also the use of ICTs as a strategic tool in economic development and governance. He noted that socio-cultural, political and economic differences across countries in Africa required prudent approaches to address them. This view was also shared by Capurro (2010) who added that sensitivity to a diversity of cultural traditions and local contexts was needed when considering the impact of ICT in Africa. Besides, Africa could, while not completely esposing the models from the West, learn from the United States, Canada and Germany regarding how these jurisdictions are dealing with ethical and moral issues relating to the application of ICT in the Information Society. For example, in these jurisdictions, the claim to privacy is protected in a variety of different ways through various statutes. In the United States, for instance, the claim to privacy is protected primarily by the First Amendment on
guarantees of freedom of speech and association.

The annual WSIS forum established to monitor progress being made in the context of Action Lines (of the plan of Action) provides a framework for examining emerging issues of ICT use, including ethical aspects in the Information Society. This forum makes appropriate recommendations for action by national governments. For example, the May 18, 2011 WSIS forum on Cyber and Information Ethics: Freedom & Security, Privacy, Malice & Harm, Property (UNESCO & WSIS 2011) was convened as part of Action Line C10 to provide the opportunity to interrogate the ethical dimension of social media, especially the design of information systems, which may impede the creation of just, peaceful, inclusive societies and the full expression of human rights. Issues around trust and the control of and use of personal data, particularly bio-data, were also examined, as was the presence of new threats to human freedoms. The ethical dimensions of ICTs have also been addressed through Action Line C3: Access-ICT and Persons with Disabilities; Action line C7: E-learning: Teachers Count; Action Line C8: Indigenous peoples and education; and Action Line C9: Media Regulation: Broadcasters and Social Media. Collectively, the efforts being made through these Action Lines should by and large guarantee ethical and moral compliance by users while interacting in social media environments.

Scholars and other stakeholders should debate and engage in open dialogue on the ethical and moral issues in social media and develop appropriate interventions. The Communication and Media Research Institute (CAMRI) (2012) points out that the Arab Spring (earlier referred to) that culminated in the overthrow of repressive regimes in the region was catalysed by social media and brought to the fore manifestations of tension and struggle among governments, citizens and terrorists, which calls for debates on social transformation in the context of new media and ICTs.

Lundsay (2010) says that social media is a challenging topic because it crosses over so many ethics and compliance issues. However, like any other ethics and compliance topic, it can and must be proactively managed. UNESCO (2008) states that promoting ethical aspects and principles that espouse creative multilingual content and universal access to information and communication should be encouraged among users and service providers. Policies to enhance ethical values in social media environments should provide commitment to the free flow of information. The dialogue and debates that have been aroused by the African Network for Information Ethics (ANIE), since 2007, should be encouraged and supported.

11. Conclusion

This chapter set out, through literature reviews and content analysis of social media user policies, to discuss issues and debates around the responsible use of ICTS in the Information Society, as enunciated by the World Summit on Information Society Action Line C10. The emphasis was placed on social media because it is the latest powerful online activity that results from the convergence of various technologies, especially the Internet, the computer and mobile phones. Four aspects were addressed in this chapter, namely 1) responsible use of ICTs in the Information Society; 2) social media contributions to the Information Society; 3) ethics and social media and 4) the ethical dimension of the Information Society. The chapter generally asserted that the laggard technological adoption behaviour that characterised Africa and its people for many years is gradually giving way in the wake of new technologies epitomised by social media. The chapter demonstrated that social media has gained acceptance and use in education, research, business, government, politics, professional practice, and in the general society, thus raising several ethical issues such as protection of users’ rights, user privacy guarantees, methods of enforcing compliance with the policies, user compensation when rights are violated, sanctions for errant users, verification of the credibility of information uploaded by users, role and responsibilities of users, cybercrime, user training, and more.
It was found that cultural practices in Africa form part of the daily norms of the people and ethical issues in the use of new technologies needed to be debated while taking cognisance of this fact. The chapter established that Africa does not seem to have any clearly documented ethical and moral traditions. Consequently, African scholars are advocating an African philosophy that will underpin ethical behaviour in an Information Society. The chapter proposed multipronged approaches to address ethical issues in the Information Society such as government providing an enabling policy and legal environment for dealing with ethical breaches; training of users on the responsible use of ICT by service providers; the use of more enhanced technological tools to make the Internet a safe and secure place; effective and rigorous monitoring of online behaviour by service providers, etc.

References


