

CHAPTER 10

Cyber Ethics


The Internet offers an unprecedented opportunity to explore ideas, communicate and develop new relationships. It is a vast network of computers, people, organizations and new business ventures, but isn't it important to think about the ethics of an Internet Citizen – sometimes called a 'netizen'?

The technology of the Internet was developed by the U.S. military to facilitate communications between the computers and computer networks of the military, defense contractors, and university laboratories that were doing defense related research. Its networks were designed to be a decentralized, self-maintaining series of redundant links, capable of rapidly transmitting communications without direct human involvement or control and with the automatic ability to reroute communications if links were damaged or unavailable. No single entity – academic, corporate, governmental or nonprofit – administers the Internet. It exists and functions as a result of the fact that thousands of separate operators of computers decided to use common data transfer protocols.

No one, therefore, owns or manages the Internet – it's like a continual frontier. As a new medium of communication and community, the Internet holds the likes of heroes, villains, curiosity seekers, snake-oil salesmen, teachers, wise men, fools, charlatans, sincere travelers and regular folk. With this new terrain and the freedom granted to you, the traveler, you are advised to proceed with a few principles in mind!

Internet use reflects character

The way you choose to use the Internet reflects your character. Are you the type that thinks that it's okay to do anything you can get away with? Most people would admit that unbridled personal freedom must be balanced with a consideration of the impact their actions have on others, on the common good. Some folks misrepresent themselves to others in chat rooms – they describe themselves as older, richer, smarter, more talented, a different sex, etc. Why do you think doing this is not so good, even if you can get away with it? What might be the dangers of doing this?



"Whenever you are to do a thing, though it can never be known but to yourself, ask yourself how you would act were all the world looking at you and act accordingly."

— Thomas Jefferson
U.S. President (1801-1809)



Words mean something

The Internet – e-mail, chat rooms, interactive real-time dialogue – is all about speaking, listening and responding. Sometimes it is easy to forget that there are real people behind the words; so we might say things that we would not normally say to a person right in front of us. Even though free speech is protected on the Net, it is clear that irresponsible or threatening talk should be taken very seriously. That is why those who engage in such talk are not immune from legal prosecution.

Jack wanted to express his hurt and angry feelings when his girlfriend dropped him for another classmate. So he sent around a story to the class by e-mail about “some girl in class” that held some very personal information about his former girlfriend and her family. The details were such that nearly everyone could tell who it was. Jack defended himself when confronted by the teacher by saying: “I can write whatever I want on the Internet. It doesn’t have to be true. It’s my right of free speech.”

But what about the others’ right to privacy? Just because it is not a face-to-face environment, can we ignore the impact of our words on the lives of others? What’s wrong with the way Jack thinks about his role and responsibilities as a Netizen?

Deleting e-mail messages – are they gone forever?

Many people who use e-mail or chat rooms to communicate with friends or to send and receive inquiries mistakenly think that after they have deleted their messages they are gone forever. This is not so. The system administrator – the business or organization that manages the server – may be making frequent backups of the system, which will include all your personal e-mails! Also, you should realize that any persons who received your messages probably still has them on their computer and may have forwarded some of them on to others.

Remember, whenever you send a message electronically, your words are in a form that allows them to be easily forwarded to another person. You have no control over where your words may end up. Even an encryption system that makes it very difficult for your words to be read by others is not fool proof. Your personal files can be accessed by others with system privileges and may be invaded by a “hacker”, i.e., someone who can break into your system electronically.

Many companies consider personal e-mail files on the company system to be public property and thus employees’ privacy rights are limited in this regard. Unless your employer has made a binding agreement to assure the privacy of your electronic communications, he has the right to read any message you post.

Group discussions

There are literally thousands of group discussions of various kinds on the Internet. People are talking about everything, from health problems to academic topics to sharing personal dreams to giving advice for the aspiring writer to

The president of a small university wanted to know whether the Internet was being used mainly for academic or personal purposes. He asked that all the e-mails of the past week be forwarded to his e-mail file and discovered that some faculty and staff wrote negative things about his new initiatives. They were reprimanded for misuse of university property.

swapping a good recipe for apple pie. What are some general rules to keep in mind when participating in an informal or formal discussion group?

- ✗ Remember that there are many people on the list and, if you're not careful, your message will be forwarded to everyone.
- ✗ Short messages are more likely to be read than long, verbose ones.
- ✗ If you want to speak directly to one person, then send the message to him, not to the entire group.
- ✗ Keep to the topic of the group.
- ✗ When replying to someone else's message, leave in enough of the message to remind the readers of the issues to which you are responding.
- ✗ When posting a general question to the whole group, have the answers sent to you directly. Then summarize the contents for the entire group.
- ✗ Learn the proper administrative procedures for subscribing to a list as well as canceling your subscription.



Beware of strangers!

While there are many great things about the Internet, there are also some real dangers, especially for young children and teens who tend to be idealistic and trusting of strangers. There are unethical folk out there in cyberspace who would like to get you to reveal many personal matters, such as your age, habits, desires, etc., simply for the sake of their own gratification. Some of these people only want to invade your privacy, others may want to entice you to meet them in person for unscrupulous reasons. Remember, you cannot tell the true age, gender or character of a person through e-mail dialogue. How can you be sure that the information you are being given is trustworthy or correct?

Cyberstalkers are very likely to use the online equivalent of 'candy.' They will make a special point of saying very sweet things to you, things that make you feel really good. They will usually take your side if you are having any problems with your parents or teachers. What they are doing is trying to gain your confidence and trust by making you feel comfortable in communicating with them. This behavior is sometimes called 'grooming.' You are being groomed, or flattered, so that you will become willing to do something that you would not otherwise be likely to do.

"It is truly a sad world when you have to be suspicious of someone who says nice things to you. It is important to learn to be discerning. There are situations where you deserve praise for what you have accomplished. But if you get the uncomfortable feeling in your gut that something is not quite right, you are probably correct. Trust the feeling!"

Nancy Willard, *The Cyber Ethics Reader*

Follow these guidelines to be safe while traveling on the Internet:

- ✗ Never give out personal information such as your address or telephone number without knowing how the information will be used.

- ✘ Never agree to meet with strangers that you have met online without checking with your parents, teachers or a responsible adult.
- ✘ If your chat-partner says, “Let’s keep this a secret,” see this as a suspicious sign.

Tell your parents, teacher or another trusted adult if you suspect that you have been approached by a voyeur, cyberstalker or untrustworthy person on the Internet. Be sure to save all your e-mail communications as evidence. Your prompt action to report may protect others from a dangerous situation.

For Your Journal



What are your parents attitudes and concerns about your using the Internet? Try to think of some healthy and unhealthy uses of the Internet. Has your use of the Internet been beneficial to your personal development? Have there been ways that you have been able to help others through the Internet? Give some examples.