

The rise of computer and internet gives humanity lots of benefits and creates endless opportunities, advances, and evolutions. However, the impact of computer and internet on free speech can often result in ethical problems. Through reading Chapter 3 in Ethics for the Information Age, lots of such problems are discussed and analyzed using ethical theories and frameworks. In it, censorship, spam, and internet addiction will be detailed described and analyzed in the following paragraphs.

The first major issue deals with the Spam. Spam is defined as irrelevant or inappropriate messages sent on the Internet to a large number of recipients, often in the form of the email. [1] The growth of email had been phenomenal since the internet age and spam was quickly evolved with it because of its high cost-effectiveness, cheap to make and easy to distribute. As of today, spam takes up on average 60 percent of the email all around the world, consuming a high amount of bandwidth and network traffic. [2] However, from some ethical theories, spam is not always at fault. From the point of Kantian analysis, we should always treat other people as ends in themselves and never only as the means to an end. The action of spam is not misrepresented. The spam sender never forces anyone to do as said in the spam, not even forcing the receiver to read the email at all. Most of the people will just ignore them without reading and those who respond to the spam are completely voluntarily. So, the spam sender is not strictly wrong. From the point of Utilitarian analysis, strangely, spam sender is also not wrong. From today's perspective, 99.9 percent of the spam is captured by AI [3]. And those captured email will be directed to spam folder without even going through the receiver's eye, not even wasting the time for the receiver to read and delete it. So, the sender is not causing any loss on the receiver's end and therefore act utilitarian suggest that the sender is not the one to blame. However, from the point of rule Utilitarian, sending spam is wrong. What if everyone around the world started sending spam to a large number of random people? Everyone will never get any useful email again. So, it is wrong to use spam to achieve personal goals. Spam, even though commonly seen as annoying and useless, is not ethically wrong under many working ethical theories.

The second major issue deals with censorship. Censorship is the attempt to suppress or regulate public access to material considered offensive or harmful. Growing up in China, I had been under the huge impact of the Chinese "Web wall" for 18 years. Many useful websites, including Google, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter are not accessible at all from mainland China, blocking many negative reviews about the communist party as well as many insights into problems that people are trying to solve. From the perspective of Kantian analysis, the government is treating the people as a means to an end. In this case, the Chinese government is treating the people as a means to solidify its power by blocking negative reviews about the party. Therefore, it's not ethical. From the perspective of Utilitarian, Chinese's government is not to blame. The blocking of inappropriate content helps children to never get in contact with those content, making sure the next generation is growing in an environment that is completely harmless. Also, thanks to the blocking of content, communist's rule have been peaceful for more than 50 years. Even though it's very hard to predict what's going to be like without the block, it can be estimated that non-blocking will only bring more harm than good. So, from Utilitarian's view, blocking is not to blame. I personally hate the block, thinking that's the revised form of closed-door policy in the internet age, but many working ethical theories show that censorship has its own correctness.

The third major issue deals with internet addiction. People are getting addicted to the internet, constantly feeling the compulsive need to be “online”. A more specific section of internet addiction is video game addiction. From the point of Kantianism, utilitarianism and social contract theory, which all share the Enlightenment view, individuals have the capacity and the obligation to use their critical judgment to govern their lives. So, addiction is vice under their view. But in the end, people are responsible for their own choice. An addict is wrong to the extent that he/she should not be addicted in the first place. Using rule utilitarianism to analyze, addiction is obviously wrong. If everyone starts having an addiction, the world will collapse because no one will do any work anymore. Under lots of other ethical theories, having internet addiction is also considered wrong. From a rational standpoint, it’s hard to find virtue inside addictions. So, we can clearly see that addictions are a wrong behavior and should not be justified.

The three major ethical issues are all prevalent in the nowadays world, with the fast advancement of internet and computers. The first two issues are considered right by certain theories and wrong by others. However, the third issue is constantly wrong and should not be encouraged.

Reference:

[1] <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/spam>, [Online]. Available.

[2] [Online]. Available: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/420391/spam-email-traffic-share/>]

[3] Cade Metz, 'Google Says its AI Catches 99.9 percent of Gmail Spam', [Online]. Available: <https://www.wired.com/2015/07/google-says-ai-catches-99-9-percent-gmail-spam/>