Chapter 5

Mutual Understanding in the Age of Vulnerable Truth

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ABSTRACT

Peaceful relations among people require mutual understanding among them, which in turn necessitates information exchange. Current information and communication technologies (ICT) allow people to exchange information, offer information about themselves, and search information about others with ease, therefore, technically, misunderstanding among people can be easily overcome. However, having access to abundance of information does not necessarily make people knowledgeable and wise. It is because information is not always intended to inform or enlighten others, but also mislead and deceive them. Despite the many problems arising from the utilization of ICT, this chapter suggests that technological solutions should be developed to identify fake information and minimize its impacts, namely, by making users more transparent, exposing them to different world views, and assisting them in identifying false information. It also argues that education is essential to promote global mutual understanding.

INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technology (ICT) has been an important driving force of the globalization of the world, both economically and socially. Our globalized world cannot exist as it is today without the intensive use of ICT (Webster, 2002). Technologies, ICT and transportation technology, have unified separate parts of the world into a single market as well as into a very large social sphere that McLuhan calls a “global village” in which “fragmented civilization of center-margin structure is suddenly experiencing an instantaneous reassembling of all its mechanized bits into an organic whole” (McLuhan, 1994, p. 93). This romantic metaphor of “global village” raises our expectation that in the modern world people can easily know and interact with one another just like what traditional villagers have for a long time done among themselves. By the intensification of interactions amongst people of the world, it is expected that mutual understanding can be easily developed and misunderstanding can be easily overcome, and so a world of peace is not impossible to achieve.

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Due to the intensive utilization of information and ICT in the contemporary world, people call this era the “information age,” even though McLuhan (1994, p. 264) has mentioned “information age” in 1964 prior to the invention of the personal computer. (The first publication of Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man, was in 1964, and MIT republished it in 1994.) The high expectation in the information age is probably due to the positive connotation of the word “inform” or “information.” As people inform or spread information to one another, not only will they mutually better understand their relationship, they will also collectively more knowledgeable and capable of making educated decisions. Accordingly, if this view is correct, the information age will lead the human civilization to a much more enlightened future.

One of the optimistic views of the information age is that the variety of rich information sources will likely advance democracy, democratization process, and international peace (Allison, 2002). The technologies of information and communication can have tremendous impact on the democratization of a society, because “They can challenge passivity, they can enhance information equality, they can overcome sectarianism and prejudice, and they can facilitate participation in deliberative political processes” (Barber, 1998, p. 582). The technologies are expected to realize Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

Nevertheless, the information age and globalization do not only raise hopes, but also concerns and even anxieties. As we are increasingly connected to one another, “our lives, our security, our hopes are inextricably linked to one another by a globalization process that is itself both a source of positive change and a source of many of the conflicts before us” (Marsella, 2005, p. 654). Indeed, ICT enables people to do many things, but it cannot improve basic human nature which is always under the tension between virtue and vice, or between greed and generosity. Both good and evil can easily be found on the Internet. On the Internet we can find people who work hard to develop the largest encyclopedia or free software comparable to commercial ones, but we can also find other people who nurture and spread their hostility toward other people, or destroy others’ reputation by spreading fake news.

Even though there is confrontation between those who are well-informed and those who are ignorant, the underlying problems rest in the confrontation between genuine informing and deliberate misinforming, between openness to learn about others and narrow-mindedness which strengthens prejudice. This confrontation is not necessarily the same as the confrontation of two distinct social groups. Virtue and vice can even coexist within a single person. Hence, it is highly possible that good and evil can present within each of conflicting parties. Further, it is highly possible that within a single group there are people who like to develop mutual understanding with another social group, as well as people who spread fake information that harms others. It is even possible that tolerant and open-minded people are defeated and kept silent by other members of the same social group, which makes hatred and prejudice dominate the group.

The high frequency and volume of incoming information weaken people’s capability to critically digest information and, therefore, make them vulnerable to fake information. This is why an irresponsible hoax sometimes can spread within a short time. The easiness of spreading and manipulating information and the easiness to hide behind fake identities both can allow irresponsible users to easily spread irresponsible information. For people do not have the opportunity to check every incoming information, and consequently it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish the truth from the false, and so their sense of truth becomes vulnerable. This complicates the development of mutual understanding between
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