Chapter 13
Applied Ethics for Digital Imagery

ABSTRACT

Graphical images have much power to evoke and represent realities, convey experiences, and share information. They may be used to share history. They may be used to discover realities and truths. In terms of the social uses of images, they may persuade individuals or whole populaces of people to take courses of action. With the growing technological affordances of image capture and creation, those who would build e-learning with imagery need to be aware of ethical guidelines in capturing, creating, handling and using digital imagery in a learning environment. The sources of these ethical guidelines include cultural values, laws, professional educational practices, professional journalistic practices, and personal ethics.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

- Demonstrate the need for foundational ethical considerations in the capturing, creation, handling, use and storage of digital imagery in an e-learning environment
- Describe the roles of faculty as creators, consumers and distributors of digital visual contents
- Explore a range of ethical guidelines from universal principles, social and cultural values, relevant laws, professional journalistic practices, professional educational practices, Net and Web ethics, and personal ethics
- Explain different paths for acquiring digital imagery for e-learning

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INTRODUCTION

Digital imagery plays a major role in creating lived senses of reality, particularly in an educational context. Images provide evidentiary proofs of particular historical events and scientific phenomena. Digital captures of artworks and cultural artifacts serve as protection of realia. Graphics help learners visualize abstract or heavily theoretical points. They express plans—in diagrams and blueprints. They reflect live terrain—whether it be in outer space, under the ocean, deep in the earth, or the Earth’s surface. They express the original creativity of various artists. They convey heavy loads of information for analysis.

Why Ethical Concerns?

The nature of digital imagery raises ethical concerns. Digital imagery is highly malleable and changeable. An image may go through many iterations without the users along the way being aware of that. It’s highly portable and may be distributed widely with a few simple button pushes. It may communicate information that is inaccurate or misleading. Used in a particular way, it can affect viewers on a subconscious level, beyond conscious awareness. Imagery is often used in a stand-alone way, without context, and without more than a brief glance, and yet people walk away with impressions and meanings. Mass media research has shown the primacy of the visual over the audio in audio-visuals in terms of human perceptions. Some of the information in an image may be intentional, but other aspects may be unintentional.

Following ethics in the capturing, creation, handling, use and storage of digital imagery in a learning environment involves plenty of vigilance and effort. To define what standards should be followed in a particular situation may depend on plenty of reflection and professional discussions. This chapter offers a generalized approach to this issue rather than a proscriptive approach.

Creators, Consumers and Distributors of Digital Visual Contents

To set the context, those who work in creating digital imagery for higher education work as creators, consumers and distributors of this content. As creators, they use their knowledge and expressive capabilities to express models, images, diagrams, blueprints, and simulations. As consumers, they use materials that are legally released (like royalty-free images) or those in the public domain. As distributors, they launch digital materials on websites, learning/course management systems (L/CMSes), digital repositories, and other venues. In a sense, they’re also protectors of sensitive information that they may handle in their line of work, which requires secure handling. Considering each of these roles is critical for a 360-degree view of the applicable ethics.

The ethics of digital imagery in e-learning stem from context-based sources: cultural values, laws, professional journalistic practices, professional education practices, and personal ethics. These factors will differ depending on the particular context. In addition, e-learning involves several other core ethical impetuses. One involves wide accessibility, as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and an in-field value of the interchangeability and portability of digital learning objects.

Figure 1, “Some Sources of Ethics in Applied Digital Imagery,” shows how the seven main influences on ethics in applied digital imagery for e-learning are arrayed: universal principles, social and cultural values, relevant laws, professional journalistic practices, professional educational practices, net and Web ethics, and personal ethics. This figure addresses how these distill into principles, which lead
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