BOOK REVIEW

Freedom and responsibility in the use of Internet: a handbook for democratic societies

*Confronting the Internet’s dark side: moral and social responsibility on the free highway*, edited by Raphael Cohen-Almagor, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, 389 pp., $99.99 (hardback), $35.00 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-107-10559-1 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-107-51347-1 (paperback)

Introduction

Raphael Cohen-Almagor is Professor and Chair in Politics at the University of Hull, United Kingdom. *Confronting the Internet’s dark side* is his fifth book in a series of texts published between 1994 and 2015, all of which cover the conjunction between ethics, law and technology. The reader soon appreciates this book as the result of a long and fruitful academic career and, in some sense, a book of intellectual maturity. Cohen-Almagor offers very complete and well-grounded explanations, along with an impressive list of references and bibliographical resources. Moreover, the book is enriched by experts’ interviews, which make it more up-to-date and realistic. Although the high amount of notes and sources interrupt the discourse too much and may impair the reading, this book stands up as a solid basis for research and teaching on the Internet.

The goals of the book are clearly identified from the beginning, and frequently recalled: ‘My intention is to evoke social and moral responsibility on the part of people who upload material on the Internet, readers of Internet publications, Internet service providers, governments, law enforcement agencies, and the international community at large. All need to address the urgent need to devise ways to counter the challenges that Internet abusers are posing to free societies’ (pp. 64–65). For that, the author proposes self-regulation, respect of the law of the state, international cooperation by all segments of society, as well as following of the basic moral and social obligations common to all liberal democracies, that is, respect for others and not harming others. The author’s view is very well synthesized in the concept of Netcitizens versus Netusers. While Netuser is a ‘neutral term that does not convey any clue regarding how a person uses the Internet’, Netcitizen ‘implies responsible use of the Internet’, what makes each one accountable for the consequences of an irresponsible use and, conversely, can make them ‘good citizens of the Internet’ when contributing to improve it and society (p. 81). In short, Necitizens are ‘Netusers with a sense of responsibility’ (p. 308).

An overview of the Internet

The book is essentially divided in two parts: the first, composed by the first three chapters, presents the foundations for the book; the second, from chapter four to nine, include a discussion on the social and moral responsibility of different agents and actors of the Internet, i.e. users who upload information, readers, Internet Service Providers (ISPs),
Web-hosting services (WHSs), states, and international community. Moreover, the book includes data from author’s fieldwork in English-speaking countries such as the US, UK, Canada and Israel. It may be useful to see in detail the content of the different chapters.

The First Chapter of the book (‘Historical Framework’) presents the history of the Internet, from its beginnings as a cutting-edge research (1957–1984) to its commercial phase (1984–89), to its status as a global network in the 1990s.

In Chapter Two (‘Technological Framework’), a basic presentation of the different technological aspects of the Net are presented (file sharing, work of search engines, tools for privacy and security, etc.), as well as some of its defining characteristics (velocity, scalability, standardization, low cost, etc.).

Probably, it is Chapter Three, called ‘Theoretical Framework’, the main chapter and work of the book. Cohen-Almagor collects there the theoretical foundations for his proposal establishing, for example, a distinction between legal responsibility (concerning agencies of state power), moral responsibility (concerning the personal responsibility of the agent to conscience) and social responsibility (which refers to societal implications of a given conduct by individuals, governments, business, etc.).

In numerous occasions, the author recalls that essentially his proposals ‘are limited to Western modern democracies’, which stand on two fundamental rights: ‘showing respect for others and not harming others’ (p. 53). These are some of his main ‘underpinning premises’ which include also a need to balance between ‘the right to freedom of expression and the harms that might result from such expression’ (p. 54); the importance of responsible agents for future communications, and the seeking of better democratic societies by fostering the engagement of all citizens (p. 57).

The author presents thoroughly two different theories that are pertinent to his discussion. On the one hand, the democratic catch, which attempts to find the Golden Mean for the sustained working of democracies. According to this theory, democracies are still young and lack experience in dealing with pitfalls, and in how to fight against explicit antidemocratic and illiberal practices (i.e. abuses of freedom and tolerance). On the second hand, the Stanley Cohen’s theory of moral panics is defined as the ‘reaction of a group of people based on a false or exaggerated perception that a cultural phenomenon, behavior, or group (mostly minority groups or subcultures) is dangerously deviant and poses a threat to society’ (p. 63). According to Cohen-Almangor, a balance between both theories is needed: ‘although some boundaries to liberty and tolerance must be established to maintain a responsible Internet, we should be careful not to awaken moral panics by either exaggerating the challenges or instilling chilling effects that might silence Netusers and organizations’ (p. 52). For the author, the blame cannot be put on technology, but on people who abuse of it. Unfortunately, because of the ‘disinhibition effect’ of the Internet (p. 53), today many Netusers unload their responsibilities upon cyberspace, while not doing this in the offline sphere.

As said, the chapters four to nine are dedicated to developing the responsibilities of the different protagonists of the Internet. In Chapter Four (‘Agent’s Responsibility’), Netusers’ responsibility is analyzed, departing from a tragedy of a teenage girl who committed suicide after Internet harassment; the chapter also deals with cyberbullying as an example of lack of Netusers’ responsibility. The proposal of the author is a need for Net education and caring for the consequences of our own actions. Chapter Five (‘Reader’s Responsibility’) instead focuses on the responsibility of passive readers, telling the story of a shooter in Montreal who had been full of hatred and raged on the web without any reader saying anything.

Moving ahead, Chapters Six and Seven delve both into the ‘Responsibility of Internet Service Providers and Web-Hosting Services’. The essential question at stake is the
following: should intermediaries as ISPs and WHs be proactive regarding the content and use of the Internet by third parties? The approach to the answer departs from an interesting discussion based on three different meanings of net neutrality: first, as a ‘nonexclusionary business practice’, so making possible all business transactions; second, as an ‘engineering principle, enabling the Internet to carry the traffic uploaded to the platform’; and, third, as a ‘content net neutrality’ (p. 148) or content nondiscrimination, which accentuates the free speech principle. Cohen-Almangor is open to the first two concepts, but proposes that ‘internet gatekeepers should adhere to the promotional approach rather than to neutrality. The promotional approach accentuates ethics and social responsibility, holding that ISPs and WHSs should promote the basic ideas of showing respect for others and not harming others’ (p. 15), what implies scrutinizing content, discriminating against illegal content and also morally repugnant and hateful behavior.

In the author’s opinion, a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) conduct in Internet business ‘enhances their public image and reputation, increases customer loyalty, results in a more satisfied and productive workforce, diminishes legal problems, and contributes to healthier community’ (p. 151). When dealing with problematic content, whether be hate, bigotry or copyright issues, ‘the issue is not the neutrality of the Net but whether we should be neutral regarding this kind of content. From a moral standpoint and from a position of CSR, we cannot be neutral’ (p. 160). ‘As thinking people, we are able to differentiate between right and wrong, good and evil; as morally responsible beings, we must discriminate between contents. We cannot be neutral about contents if we wish to continue leading free, autonomous lives’ (p. 170). Cohen-Almangor recognizes that cyberbullying and hate are protected forms of speech in the US under the First Amendment yet, ‘morally speaking, should be discriminated against in one form or another’ (p. 176).

The author makes an original proposal, when speaking of search engines. If until now, ‘optimizing search results has been influenced by business consideration’, now ‘it can be influenced by standards of social responsibility’ (p. 227), for example, including, next to sensitive searches, related ads or links (i.e., in the case of a person who is wishing to commit suicide, offering help sites to overcome that intention).

The last two chapters deal with state and international community responsibilities. In Chapter Eight (‘State Responsibility’), the author remembers the conflict between technology, which has no geographical boundaries, and the states’ jurisdiction, pushing for a respect of the national laws: ‘The Internet is made by the people, for the people, and needs to be abide by the laws of the people’ (p. 15). Finally, Chapter Nine (‘International Responsibility’) discusses modes of international cooperation and means to promote internet cybersecurity to deal with global concerns like hate, terrorism, or child pornography.

In the concluding chapter, the author sustains the ‘networked nationalism’ as the best model for Internet governance. This model, as proposed by van Dijk (2012), ‘accepts the power of networking but keeps it under the control of the states through international treaties and networks’ (p. 311). Also in his last pages, the author makes what can seem an odd proposal: the creation of a new browser, known as CleaNet, to be used in liberal democracies. The browser, assures Cohen-Almangor, would make possible a safer internet environment because users would agree on what constitutes illegitimate expression to be excluded from it.

Finally, two elements that reinforce the handbook dimension of the text are both the glossary, with almost 200 basic concepts, and the complete thematic index at the end of the book. Moreover, the practical and didactic goals of the book are enhanced thanks to
outlines and summaries at the beginning and in the conclusions of each chapter as well as for the useful examples that reinforce the author’s case.

**Repetitions, moral of minimums and unrealism**

Leaving aside all the positive contents and intentions behind the book, in my opinion there are also some small flaws and drawbacks in *Confronting the Internet dark’s side*. Essentially three:

In the first place, the book is too repetitive: first, with the excessive number of examples that do not add much new information to the issues of discussion; but, second, and most of all, with the topics. The author insists to exhaustion on Internet dangers such as terrorism, cyberbullying, hate speech and, most of all, child pornography. This concern is even clear in the end book’s references, which after an extensive general section on selected bibliography, offers specific sections with more references on ‘Child pornography, crime, and Cyberbullying’, ‘Hate’ and ‘Terrorism’. Emphasis on the harms of adult pornography is, I think, missing.

Also there is an excessive concern regarding cyberbullying, including a complete description of its effects, practical advices to fight it and numerous resources (for example, pp. 106–114). Although the author affirms, correctly that ‘agents are morally and socially responsible for all their conduct, whether in a cyber or a real environment’ (p. 114), his view may seem too punitive – insistence on denouncing and reporting wrongdoing – and lacking in educating on virtue.

Secondly, the honorable intention of the author is enclosed in the straitjacket of a moral of minimums, essentially based in a ‘what to do not to harm’ policy. Probably the book could be more appealing and positive regarding what makes a person grow and mature. In this sense, Cohen-Almangor shows no restraints in following Kant when affirming that ‘action has moral worth only if it is performed from a sense of duty. Duty, rather than purpose is the fundamental concept of ethics’ (pp. 55–56). This view forgets, among others, the possibility of love, superior to a mere sense of moral obligation: like a mother for her child or a citizen for his country.

Moreover, the author contests the assumption of universalism of the liberal ideology, or acceptance of universal moral values: ‘Sociologically speaking, we cannot ignore the fact that universal values do not underlie all societies’ (p. 7). While it cannot be denied that ‘sociological’ phenomenon, *de facto* Cohen-Almangor is constantly proposing basic moral principles (be good, do not harm) that require a common minimum human nature and, thus, a natural law that justifies the need for defending a moral and social responsibility.

Finally, Cohen-Almangor’s underlying intention of ‘converging freedom with social responsibility’ blossoms in the conclusion in a proposal that appears non-practical and somehow unrealistic. It is laudable in its principle, not in the mechanics. Specifically the author proposes the ‘introduction of a new browser’, *CleaNet*, funded by nonpartisan organizations and free of governmental control (p. 319). According to Cohen-Almangor, ‘CleaNeat will be an enhanced, citizen-based form of server filtering’ (p. 322), allowing a committee representing Netcitizens ‘to decide what should be excluded’ (p. 320) from the browser. The logic behind this proposal is that ‘no existing filter can achieve the desired outcome of a clean Internet, with full transparency in regard to the relevant considerations and the citizens’ ability to deliberate, exchange ideas, and influence cybersurfing’ (p. 325). The process of the implementation of *CleaNet* is developed all the way to insignificant details like the training of the directive committee, the number of members, the duration...
of their mandate, the recommended payroll, as well as the tasks of the committee: attention to the public, yearly reports, etc.

Theoretically, it is a positive proposal: ‘CleaNet will be the result of democratic and open deliberation involving citizens’, helping Netusers ‘to surf the Internet in a friendly environment, free of the antisocial, evil material’, and will be ‘a pragmatic, fluid tool, sensitive to cultural norms and open to contestation. It is designed by the people, for the people’ (pp. 324–325). In practice, however, the proposal seems unrealistic in many of its dimensions. For example, when proposing that the browser will be attentive ‘to societal and cultural norms’ (p. 322), thanks to diverse technological configurations adapted to countries which may allow, for example, the acceptance of searches on Holocaust denial in US based websites, but not in Germany or Israel. This is a premise based on an inadequate identification between today’s cultural and state boundaries. Moreover, the growing speed of data in the Internet makes it virtually impossible to reach agreements in each one of the contents.

Certainly of laudable interest is the author’s proposal that the ordering of ClearNet’s search results be ‘influenced by standards of moral and social responsibility, a commitment to preserving and promoting security online and offline, and adherence to the liberal principles (… of) promoting liberty, tolerance, and human dignity; showing respect for others; and not harming others’ (p. 323).

Besides this last wishful thinking of the author, that may undermine the validity of the book’s content over time, there is no doubt that the Cohen-Almangor’s text is a helpful reading, especially for professors and researchers in media ethics, media law, sociology of communication and ICTs. Moreover, the wide humanistic formation of the author makes the reading a learning experience to all, and a final idea remains clear to the reader: Internet is a tool, a technology, managed by humans, so we will make of it what we want to make of it.

Reference

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