

Corporate Voices, Personal Voices: The Ethics of the Internet

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Two distinct discourses are competing for dominance of the Internet. Each of these "voices" identifies different ethical issues as being the key ones. The Corporate voice of press releases and official company statements makes the legal enforcement of property rights a key issue. Advocates of the "personal voice" of e-mails and chat rooms make freedom of expression and personal conversation more important. The paper compares these contesting ethical visions for the Internet. Neither voice makes a serious issue of "privacy of personal information", a key concern of a more "humanist" intellectual tradition associated with public institutions. The issue is more the relationships and relative strengths of these discourses. "Ethical conversations" are one way in which the personal voice can be strengthened within organisations.

1 Corporate Voices and Personal Voices

"Never, I think, in the history of human societies Éhas there been such a tricky combination in the same political structures of individualization techniques, and of totalization procedures"

Michel Foucault 1983, p213

There appear to be two dominant discourses defining social practices and uses in relation to the Internet: one associated with individuals acting for "corporations" and another with individuals acting from more "personal" interests. The first has the formal tone of the 'official' language in which corporations present themselves. The second is the more informal chat of conversations or e-mails. The two represent two different ways of "conducting business" on the Internet¹.

In this paper, we want to tease out these two discourses, their relatively distinct programs for the use of the Internet, and their implications for consideration of 'the ethics of the Internet'. In particular, we want to look at the different "ethics" that are explicit/implicit in each discourse. To cut to the chase, the distinction is between 'compliance with a codified ethics' and, to use words which may indicate our value position, 'responsible participation in an ongoing

ethical conversation' (Byrne Armstrong, 1999). Underlying the two discourses are two quite different sets of values and different visions of the Internet. The corporate vision sees the Internet as an extension to the realm of "property" and income generation, while advocates of the "personal voice" value the Internet as an extension of creativity and connection between people.

One way of understanding the relation between the two discourses is as a contest for power through the Internet, a point illustrated below. This isn't so much a contest to the death of one voice or the other. Both clearly co-exist and will

continue to do so. It is an issue of the relative strength of the voices. On the one side is the fear

of both increased "commodification" of people and their relationships and increased surveillance. For these reasons advocates of the personal voice are attracted to the opportunities the Internet gives people to shape the world through their conversations and stronger connection. The promise of the "personal voice" is a richer everyday life, a more equitable access to resources and opportunity, and a more sustainable organisation of these resources. In other words, the "personal voice" discourse promises to be more ethical. The easier expression of personal voices within corporations would, I also believe, increase their effectiveness and creativity as well. These are my ethical assumptions.

We have taken as our source for the 'personal' group of writers who publish in the more 'avant garde' publications about the Internet. These include the authors of a recent book The Cluetrain Manifesto, Levine, Locke, Searls and Weinberger, (2000), writers in Wired magazine, and 'Internet' 'zines' generally, and web sites like that of the Electronic Frontier Foundation. It includes writers, web designers, software engineers and marketers closely associated with the development of the Internet.

2 The Qualities of the Voices

One way of understanding the difference in quality, or tone, of the corporate and the personal voices is the difference between work life and leisure time. It is the difference between the formality and measured tones of "professional" behaviour, and the spontaneous intensity of a conversation between friends, or, at the extreme, hilarity at a party. The dichotomy is explored in depth in

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Levine et al (2000) which strongly advocates the use of the personal voice on the Internet. They quote an example, which illustrates the difference in the qualities of the two voices.

"Hart Scientific, Inc [www.hartscientific.com] posted a convenient comparison of conversational versus traditional writing on their Web site. They have two versions of their Y2K compliance page. You can tell them apart:

'Noncompliance issues could arise if Hart Scientific manufactured products are combined with other manufacturer's products. Hart cannot test all possible system configurations in which Hart manufactured products could be incorporated. Our products currently test compliant and will continue to operate correctly after January 1, 2000. However customers must test integrated systems to see if components work with Hart Scientific manufactured products. Hart

makes no representation or warranty concerning non-Hart manufactured products.'

And,É

'If you're using our equipment with someone else's gear, who the hell knows what's going to happen. We sure don't, so how can we promise you something specific, or even vague for that matter? We can't so we won't. However, we love our customers and like always we'll do whatever is reasonable to solve whatever problems come up, if there are any'," (Levine et al, 2000, p 65).

This illustrates a number of the features of the voices. From the perspective of people using the 'personal voice', the corporate voice is a centrally controlled monotone.

"companies feel a tremendous urge to control communications; it seems as bred-in-the-bone as wanting to sell products. They create org charts to define who gets to do the talking. They use policy statements: only PR can talk to the press. É We can't afford to muddy our message or disclose our positioning." (Levine et al, 2000, p106)

Corporate Voice	Personal Voice
Rational/legal (linear) thinking	Narrative/experiential (story) thinking
Cautious/risk averse ('law suit' lurking in the background)	Expressive/volatile (even 'over the top' exaggeration)
Impersonal tone	Personal tone
'Political correctness'	Irreverence, parody
Formal etiquette and a serious, 'proper' tone	Informal, including swearing and humour
Detached/objective	Engaged/subjective
Prescriptive/Instructional tone	Story telling
Planned statement	Spontaneous expression
Focus on 'Property/Monetary' (rights)	Focus on 'Relationship' (values)
Universalistic	Particularistic
Standardisation/singular ('brand')	Difference/Multiplicity
Purpose is to 'manage impressions' (eg build the brand image)	Purpose is to share (experience, knowledge, new ideas), to 'connect'

Table - The Qualities of 'Corporate' and 'Personal' Voices

The differences in voice quality are stated systematically in the Table. A prototype of the personal voice is the e-mail. E-mails are characterised in Cluetrain as being

"brief, funny, hastily written, ill-considered, thoughtless, regrettable: all part of the charm!" (Levine et al, 2000, p147)

3 Uses of the Web

Implicit in the two sets of voice qualities are distinct, and competing, discourses of the Internet.

Generally, the corporate use of the Internet is to enhance what corporations are already doing. A typical statement from many in the business world is that e-business, for

example, *"is simply a new way to do what we are already doing, despite all the hype"*.

For corporations, the Internet is a new set of products, new ways of adding commercial value, (eg e-business software, modems and routers are new Internet-related products). Software is a new form of "property", although not so different from music, literature and abstract ideas, which become the "intellectual property" of corporations. Electronic databases of consumption behaviour and consumer addresses become another commodity, with significant ethical implications, which are discussed below. In fact, the Corporate version of the Internet is in terms of utility and marketable commodity.

In contrast, the coterie see the innovation of the Internet, not in its extension to the domain of property, but in its extension to the reach and influence of the "personal voice".

"The spiritual lure of the web is the promise of the return of voice."

"The web's promise of a voice is the granting of a place ["a public place"] in which we can be who we are (and even who we aren't, if that's the voice we've chosen)."

"Chat, free e-mail, automatic home pages - all reinforce our feeling that not only is it easy to enter into discourse with others, but also that we're by-god entitled to wade into the conversation stream. Heaven help you if you get in my way, or try to stifle my voice." (Levine et al, 2000 pps 39, 44 and 50)

They say, stating the values and ethical position associated with the personal voice:

"Authenticity, honesty, and personal voice underlie much of what's successful on the web. Its egalitarian nature is engendering a renaissance in personal publishing. The web gives us an opportunity to escape from the bounds imposed by broadcast media's one-to-many notions of publishing. [Its] ultimate success comes from people wanting to listen, needing to hear each other's voices, and answering in kind." (Levine et al, 2000, p 51)

As well as freedom to express a personal voice, there is recognition of the context of this personal voice - relationship. Barlow (2000) believes:

"relationship is at the heart of what supports 'knowledge workers'. In general, if you substitute 'relationship' for 'property', you can begin to understand why a digitised, information economy can work fine in the absence of enforceable property law. Cyberspace is unreal property. Relationship is its geology." (Barlow, 2000)

Coterie members see the contest between the corporate voice and the personal voice as being:

"The great cultural war [which] has broken out at last." (Barlow, 2000)

4 Ethical Issues and the Internet

For people speaking in the corporate voice and the personal voice there are different ethical issues. The perception of something as an ethical issue depends on one's position. The two voices represent two positions, with different interests at stake in the Internet, different social and conversational practices and within which different ethical issues are relevant.

I would like to start by 'painting with a broad brush'. From the corporate voice, the major ethical issues concern property rights, particularly the protection of intellectual property. From the personal voice, the major ethical issues involve freedom of expression and association.

As advocates of the personal voice, members of the 'coterie' see the corporate voice as seeking to constrain freedom of expression and exploration. Corporate control and administration is a subjugation, or neutralisation, of the personal voice. They talk of "the Corporate colon of editors, gatekeepers and other factota" which submerge and homogenise individuality and reduce creative quality, and org charts which determine who can talk to who.

In his "Cyberspace Independence Declaration", Barlow (1996) addresses the "Governments of the Industrial World" in the following terms:

"Your increasingly obsolete information industries [the "corporations"] would perpetuate themselves by proposing laws, that claim to own speech itself throughout the world. These laws would declare ideas to be another industrial product." (Barlow, 1996)

You ["Governments"] claim there are problems among us that you need to solve. You use this claim as an excuse to invade our precincts. Many of these problems don't exist. Where there are real conflicts, where there are wrongs, we will identify them and address them by our means. We are forming our own Social Contract. We will create a civilisation of the Mind in Cyberspace. May it be more humane and fair than the world your governments have made before." "A Cyberspace Independence Declaration", (Barlow, 1996)

One of the major grounds for contest between these two groups is the validity of property - property rights and ownership. Property is a key ethical issue, along with compliance with the laws that support property ownership. The question at issue is whether property, or the analogy to the world of "things", holds up in cyberspace. The issue becomes even more refined because "intellectual property" and copyright already make "property" out of something less tangible. From the corporate perspective, property is an important ethical issue: ownership ensures income. Furthermore, to make the massive investments required to bring electronic solutions to fruition requires secure ownership to ensure return on that investment.

Advocates of the personal voice have colourful arguments as to why this preoccupation amounts to "old economy thinking". There are three basic arguments. The first is that defining Internet material as property won't work because it is simply unenforceable. Cyber walls can always be penetrated and the person breaking through is very hard to identify. A second reason it won't work is that many Internet users, including those espousing a 'personal voice' do not accept the legitimacy of the property claims. They will not support it and without that support property laws will not work.

Using the first two arguments, in the context of Napster, software which allows downloaded music to be shared freely on the Internet, Barlow (2000) says:

"No law can be successfully imposed on a huge population that does not morally support it and possesses easy means for its invisible evasion"

A third consideration is that advocates of the personal voice do not believe that workable ownership rights are

necessary for corporate investors to make profits. Barlow (2000) twists a well known phrase to claim that wide spread free diffusion of things on the Net creates the popularity that is turned into profits.

"For ideas, fame is fortune. And nothing makes you famous faster than an audience willing to distribute your work for free."

This point is fundamental to coterie notions of the new economy. Barlow (2000) gives several examples.

"In the two years since MP3 music began flooding the Net, CD sales have risen 20%".

Similarly, the film industry had feared that home viewing of videos would replace going to the movies. Revenue from the movies has increased and, as well, the industry has reaped considerable income from video sales. He also argues that corporations have not lost through the piracy of software. Fame makes fortune in software too and we are also likely to want a 'relationship' with our software provider so that we can get support.

Barlow (2000) also cites his own situation:

"I'm paid reasonably well to write, despite the fact that I put most of my work on the Net before it can be published. But I'm paid a lot more to speak and still more to consult."

He continues with what is the fundamental affirmation of the 'personal voice':

"Ésince my real value lies in something that can't be stolen from me - my point of view. A unique and passionate viewpoint is more valuable in a conversation than the one way broadcast of words."

Returning again to the "cultural war", Barlow (2000) notes the Corporate reliance on the law as the means to support its property

"We've won the revolution. It's all over but the litigation."

In the corporate voice, ethics as well has a legal flavour. Ethical behaviour is defined as compliance with a code of conduct. The similarity to a legal code is strong. The point of ethics is this view is compliant behaviour.

An alternative view of ethics sees it more as an attitude in pursuit of what Foucault calls "practices of the self" ("self-knowledge, self reflection, self-examination") through which people seek to realise in themselves certain values. Foucault (1985) distinguishes such an ethics from standard codes of ethics.

"Évery morality, Écomprises the two elements É codes of behaviour and forms of subjectification. ÉT]hey can never be entirely dissociated, though they may develop in relative independence of one another - Én certain moralities the main emphasis is placed on the code, on its systematicity, its richness, its capacity to adjust to every possible case ÉWith moralities of this type, Éthe ethical subject refers his [sic] conduct to a law, or set of laws, to which he must submit at the risk of committing offences that may make him liable to punishment."(Foucault, 1985, p29 — 30)

In moralities with a focus on "practices of the self", Foucault notes,

"Here the emphasis is on forms of relations with the self, on the methods and techniques by which he works them out, Énd on the practices that enable him to transform his own mode of being." (1985, p30)

The users of the personal voice advocate a self-aware ethics rather than the legally codified form. Barlow (2000) believes that the removal of property and the law from the Internet would see an increase ethical behaviour:

"I believe that, in the absence of law, ethics are going to make a major comeback on the Net. In an environment of dense connection, where much of what we do and say is recorded, preserved, and easily discovered, ethical behaviour becomes less a matter of self-imposed virtue and more a matter of horizontal social pressure."

In this formulation, Barlow (2000) is relying on the power of surveillance and social pressure to ensure compliance, more like compliance with a coded ethics. But elsewhere it is the shift from "property" to "relationship" in Internet conversation that is reflected in the ethics.

"Finally, there is the role of ethics. (I can hear you snickering already.) But hey, people actually do feel inclined to reward creative value if its not too inconvenient to do so. As Courtney Love said recently, in a brilliant blast at the music industry: 'I'm a waiter. I live on tips.' She's right. People want to pay her because they like her work."(Barlow, 2000)

5 The Ethical Issue of Privacy

One of the central ethical issues of the Internet is not an important concern for either of the two groups. Protection of personal "privacy" is seriously challenged by the aggregation of personal information from Internet transactions in electronic databases. While "data files" on (at least a few) people have probably always been compiled, electronic media enables information on any actions carried out on the Internet by anyone to be compiled into a database. We haven't quite reached the stage where comprehensive data is collected on everyone, but that has become a strong prospect. More common is the compilation of this information to provide analyses of consumption patterns to anticipate future behaviour and identify possible desires for future consumption. This data is used directly by vendors (its called Customer Relationship Management (CRM) in business-to-business commerce). And it is a valuable and marketed resource for other companies creating what Whitaker (2000) calls "the commodification of personal information".

These Internet practices by major Corporate organisations with Web sites are certainly pervasive. A recent survey of the 100 most visited Australian web sites, conducted by Andersen Legal (2000) found that:

- Ø 72% of the sites collected personal information, while
- Ø 51% had a published privacy policy, and

- Ø 14% notify users of the specific personal information that is collected.
- Ø Only 14% give users the opportunity to have that personal information deleted
- Ø 43% of those collecting personal information did so without the user actively providing that information
- Ø 35% say that they may disclose personal information to third parties (ie 71% of the half with privacy statements).
- Ø 10% of sites attempt to plant third party cookies on users' computers.

This is certainly a poor record of privacy protection. Significantly, privacy is not an issue of great significance to exponents of either the corporate voice or the personal voice. In the case of the corporate voice, this is not surprising. Typically, it is corporate commercial interests that initiate these intrusions on privacy. The corporate voice is likely to raise privacy as an ethical issue when they are using the principle to avoid disclosure and public accountability or to protect commercial secrets.

From the texts I have been reading, privacy is an issue for the coterie, mostly in relation to workplace electronic surveillance. However, an ethical analysis of the privacy issue could be made within the personal voice. Database intrusions of privacy and commodification of personal information are an active silencing of the personal voice. The extremity of this 'silencing' is obvious in the difficulty experienced by people attempting to get information corrected, or removed from their files. Database development is certainly not the "conversation", with personal initiative that advocates of the personal voice want from the Internet.

Privacy is a concern of a third important public voice in relation to the Internet: rationalist intellectuals. This is a group which includes many of us at this conference. The group includes civil libertarians and others drawing on the intellectual tradition of science and rational analysis to increase human well-being, guided by progressive, humanist ideals. Although there is overlap between this group and those participating in corporate and personal voice discourses, this third voice is associated with another group of institutions. They are likely to work within publicly supported institutions such as education, religion, government and community service and the professions.

There are particular reasons why these practices of rationality and humanistic purpose make privacy a vexing issue. It is this tradition that has articulated the prevailing conception of "human being" and of human rights. Central to this conception is freedom of choice, control over personal information as universal principles in their own right. Defining and establishing human rights has been a central project of this humanist tradition. This control and choice over personal information is immediately and powerfully challenged by database compilation.

This process of surveillance is part of Whitaker's (2000) "panopticon State". The emerging panopticon is not as

centralised as Bentham's design for a prison in which all inmates are visible to a central inspector, but unable to see him or one another. There are multiple databases with different information, and although attempts have been made, there is no single central compilation of all information by one source.

There is another difference, which poses an important ethical paradox in relation to Internet privacy. Consumers, a fourth "voice", by and large do not find these electronic intrusions into their basic liberties very disturbing. Whitaker (2000) talks of "the participatory panopticon". Generally, as a society, we are choosing to accept this surveillance and gain benefits from it. He is at pains to explain this acceptance:

"What if one's purchases are carefully recorded to construct a profile of consumption preferences for the use of various marketers? Not everyone will object to this if they see their needs and desires being better served as a result. Think of it as a Christmas wish list that enables Santa to serve you better." (Whitaker, 2000, p 141)

This makes the ethical issue, from the consumer perspective, an even more surprising one. The ethical issue might well be the exclusion of certain classes of consumer from corporate databases.

"Santa Claus is a fairy tale taught to children. ÉIt also embodies a crucial element of contemporary capitalist culture. Punishment means exclusion from the positive benefits of the consumer society." (Whitaker, 2000, p139)

"recognition is granted only in exchange for purchasing power. Marginalised groups without effective purchasing power remain marginalised." (Whitaker, 2000, p149)

On the other side, it could be argued that this consent to the invasion of privacy is flawed. It is not based on full participation or complete knowledge of databases and their ramifications. It is based on a passive acquiescence, which is also encouraged by the distance and anonymity of the corporate voice.

6 The Use of "Ethical Conversations": Changing Corporate Cultures

"Éthe proper answer to a heartfelt question is a conversation, and conversations make the world." (Levine et al, 2000 p 169)

With personal voices stronger within corporate organisations, there is more discussion of issues important to employees and more active participation in improving work processes to make useful innovations. An issue is how to encourage this transition to more open and personal ways of talking.

One way of introducing the "personal voice" into corporate organisations is through the "ethical conversations". The aim of ethical conversations is to:

- Ø enable open discussion of difficult, "unspeakable" (Argyris and Schon, 1978) issues in the workplace
- Ø clarify the effects people are experiencing as a consequence of these issues, and,

Ø to enable participants to recognise different points of view.

One way in which this can be addressed is through the Intranet. Some organisations have built *Ethical Conversations* into Intranet sites. For example, one organisation has set up a Humour mill on the site, employees ask questions of management about rumours they have heard. Another has set up an "ethics chat room" where employees post "ethical dilemmas" they face in their jobs, for wider discussion. Anonymity is used to avoid personal retribution and to minimise the influence of power and rank differences. Using Intranets in this way can make it easier to hold public discussions around difficult issues. It can also improve connections between people in the workplace, thereby building the relationships required for "ethics" and ethical conversations to thrive.

7 Organisation Forms for the Personal Voice

The dichotomy between 'personal' and 'corporate' voices is obviously not a rigid one. The two statements from Hart Scientific Inc quoted at the beginning of the paper indicate that the two voices can co-exist. More accurately, corporate organisations can shift to include more 'personal' voices. Similarly, the intentions of the coterie are not so much to destroy corporations and their voices, but to create more space for the personal voice within corporations and to reduce the constraints on personal voice across the web.

Internet knowledge workers are in the unique situation of being indispensable to the corporate world, but often having a strong commitment to the development of their "personal voice". Their indispensability means that they are able to attract enormous salaries and high positions in the corporate world. Their commitment to personal voice means that they find the constraints of the corporate world irksome and stupid (Levine et al, 2000). They like the money, but not the situation so they would like to find/invent some other way of working.

I am working with an IT engineering and web-site development company that is exploring alternative organisation forms. It is seeking to preserve the autonomy and independence of IT knowledge workers by changing the nature of employment. All longer-term people in the company have become partners with shares proportional to an assessment of their contribution. Different departments are organised as non-hierarchical "swarms". A challenge being faced is how to plan, coordinate and manage projects efficiently without resorting to hierarchy. A practice is evolving of having one person as an overall Operations Coordinator, who works with an Account Manager to scope and define projects. This uses the company Intranet and implementation of the plan is expected to be self-monitoring. Leadership roles of "project framework definer", mentor and development initiator, have been assigned without them holding "positional power" or overbearing hierarchical (org chart) status. The aim is to avoid reducing personal autonomy and voice. My role is

to support this exploration as an outsider, by monitoring achievement of project targets, facilitating reflection on success and failure, including mediation of conflicts that arise and personal coaching.

8 Conclusion

This paper has been concerned with two major points. First, there is a contest on the Internet between two distinct voices: a "corporate voice" of official press releases and company pronouncements and the "personal voice" of committed Internet professionals and users conversing with one another in their "free" time. The personal voice has a promise of creativity and connection, which could enrich our lives and, as well, improve the effectiveness and vitality of corporations themselves.

These two discourses have quite different ethical concerns in relation to the Internet. The second point I have wanted to emphasise is that what one sees as an ethical issue depends on one's position and the discourse that one is participating within. People participating in the Internet through a personal voice are more concerned with freedom of access and connecting conversation. Those engaging through a corporate voice are more concerned with preserving the legal validity of property rights (often against challenge by those operating through personal voices).

It is also clear that neither of these voices addresses the concern of "privacy", an issue particularly in relation to electronic databases. This is a concern for those with a third voice, traditional public-minded humanist intellectuals, a voice often associated with more public institutions: education, religion, government and community service. Paradoxically, there is a fourth important voice, that of consumers who find their transparency in databases, not an invasion but a benefit which enables them to access more consumables in the way that they wish. Within this consumer discourse, the ethical issue becomes not privacy, but one of deprivation by exclusion of those who do not have an income high enough to interest a marketer.

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