# Ethics In Social Media

**Our online actions on social media sites can affect individuals and communities globally. Aleem Karmali explores the importance of applying our values and notions of ethical literacy, to the ways in which we communicate**

In October 2012, Facebook reached one billion users globally, highlighting the prevalence of social media in communicating today. Yet, there are a number of related ethical concerns to be aware of, from privacy to the civility of online interactions, to how we can apply our value systems to everyday online interactions.

## Globalisation

Today's ethical challenges should be understood in the context of globalisation, in which modern transportation and communication technologies allow people of diverse backgrounds and value systems to come into greater contact with one another, both physically and virtually. There are many recent examples of global interconnectedness, as events in one part of the world have prompted reactions abroad.

## Social Media: Pros And Cons

Social media can be described as interactive communication technologies on the internet, including popular sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs and many others. They are highly accessible, allowing anyone online to publish material.

These sites are excellent for keeping in touch and networking, while the rapid flow of information allows people to share information, promote causes, and discuss topics in a civil, intellectual, and productive way. Yet, it is common to see discussions degenerate into abusive, offensive, and divisive arguments, and to see irrelevant, incomplete, or incorrect information spreading as quickly as reliable information.

Social media encourages the impulsive posting of one's thoughts, photos, and videos, in order to keep people updated on your life. However, it is important to remember that any data posted online is immediately out of your control, with many people failing to think about the long-term consequences when posting. Privacy concerns are significant as people share personal information that can be sold or stolen. In addition, people may regret or be haunted by their posts later, possibly causing embarrassment, mental distress, or even costing their reputation or their job.

As social media is still new, we may find in time that what people post in their youth could continue to loom over them until they are elderly, possibly even impacting their children and grandchildren.

## Ethical Literacy

Social Media is neither inherently good nor bad. Rather, as Mawlana Hazar Imam has said, "How we use [technologies] will depend – in every age and in every culture – not on what sits on our desktops, but on what is in our heads – and in our hearts" (The LaFontaine-Baldwin Lecture, Toronto, 2010).

This means that we require ethical literacy to help guide our online conduct. In 2009, at the University of Alberta, Mawlana Hazar Imam described the need to "develop 'ethically literate' people who can reason morally whenever they analyse and resolve problems, who see the world through the lens of ethics, who can articulate their moral reasoning clearly – even in a world of cultural and religious diversity – and have the courage to make tough choices".

Dr. Bashir Jiwani, an ethicist who provides tools for structured decision-making explains that decisions are "based on our understanding of what we know to be true about the world and what matters in life. Our perspective on any decision, action or attitude will be based on: 1) this factual understanding, 2) this understanding of what matters, and 3) the feelings we are experiencing. Ethics analysis is about examining these three dimensions to arrive at a justified understanding of what really is true, what really should matter, and how we should act".

## The Shi'a Ismaili Muslim Value System

Understanding what matters means understanding our values. The values of Shi'a Ismaili Islam derive from the guidance of the Qur'an, Prophet Muhammad, and our Imams, particularly the Imam-of-the-Time.

The Qur'an states: *"Woe to those who pray, but who are oblivious of their moral duties"* (107:4-5). Thus, ethical behaviour is central to Islam's guidance on how we should live our lives.

Several core Islamic values embodied by the Prophet were described by Mawlana Hazar Imam at the International Seerat Conference, including, "integrity, loyalty, honesty, generosity both of means and of time, his solicitude for the poor, the weak and the sick, his steadfastness in friendship, his humility in success, his magnanimity in victory, his simplicity, [and] his wisdom in conceiving new solutions for problems" (Karachi, 1976).

## Applying Ethics to Social Media

The challenge for us all is to live our values and make good, ethical decisions. When posting online, we should consider if we are positively representing the values of Shi'a Ismaili Islam, or if we might potentially cause damage to ourselves, others, or to the reputation of our faith or our community globally. We should be aware that what may seem harmless to the Jamat in one country may have consequences for Jamats living elsewhere.

Those we interact with in our lives may see us as representatives of Islam and the Ismaili community. By thinking carefully and living our values, we can become ambassadors of Islam who represent a positive, ethical face of the faith.

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