Descriptive ethics on social media from the perspective of ideology as defined within systemic functional linguistics

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Issues of ethical behaviour are becoming increasingly important in discussions about social media, ranging from concerns about online behaviour and safety of individuals to debates about social media data usage in research, business and governance.

Within this context, the lack of a standardised vocabulary is a significant roadblock in the attempt to achieve a consensus on ethics. Vocabulary difficulties can be identified not only between separate domains of activity (compare, for example, legal language on data protection to language in various professional codes of practice) but often within the literature of a single domain. As an initial step towards addressing this gap, we propose a study of the fundamental meanings encoded through the terminology used in social media ethics. Can linguistic choices be a contributing factor in explaining observed conflicts between expressed attitudes and evidenced behaviour?

A descriptive ethics approach is applied to identify the ethical principles and choices evidenced in the codes of practice of a variety of UK chartered professional bodies. The same process is applied to the relevant European and UK legislation. Data is further enhanced by analysing the observed ethical choices made based on these regulations: legal verdicts, types of activities which received ethical approval, public reactions to evidenced practices etc.

The data identified through the descriptive ethics approach is then analysed in terms of meaning using the systemic functional linguistics framework. The context of the source texts is assessed to identify the ideological level employed.

It is shown how the ideological level of meaning of a vocabulary entry is perceived differently, based on the register variable of field which corresponds to different activity domains (legal, medical, technical etc.). Such fundamentally encoded differences at the variables of ideology and field lead to cases where the same vocabulary entry has several presumed definitions operating simultaneously. The resulting competing readings pose a great risk for miscommunication and further impede the already difficult task of reaching consensus on ethical perspectives.

Preliminary results indicate that vocabulary choices can be linked with behavioural outcomes. For example, 'privacy' is more tightly safeguarded through regulation when it is ideologically perceived as equating to a graded level of access and is a more easily dismissed concern when it is equated to secrecy.

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References

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