

Digital Ethics and Family Therapy

By Harold W. Anderson, Ph.D.

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Recently a family and their 16-year old son presented to me. The parents were concerned that their son was addicted to computer games. He had gone to a department store to play in a computer game tournament. Apparently, this game was very popular among youth of his age and he was quite good at it. He took third place in the contest, but the contest was really a pretext. A new version of this game was coming out that night and it was a version that he and his friends just had to have. Rather than coming home following the tournament, the 16-year old made a bad choice. He hung out with his friends while they waited for the game to go on sale and lied to his parents about what he was doing and where he was at. This was not the first time that computer games had led to conflict within the family system, but it was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back, and so this incident brought the family into therapy. During one of the sessions where the high expectations of his parents were displaying stubborn inflexibility, the exasperated young man looked at his parents and explained, "The problem with you guys is that you are analog people, but I am a digital person." The young man admitted that his choices were bad ones and he regretted that his lies had eroded the trust of his parents, but he was also frustrated because what is normal in the digital world presented itself as addiction in the analog world of his parents. How could he get them to understand his world when from his view, their world was just too analog?

Another couple presented to me because the man was having an affair, but this affair was not with an actual woman; it was with a virtual woman. The man, his wife suggested, had an Internet sexual addiction that was destroying their marriage. On the other hand, the man seemed confused. He was not interested in a real woman and the **women** he viewed were simply digitally generated images in a virtual reality that wasn't really real. His sexual activities online shouldn't bother his wife he thought. It was his wife that he loved, not these pictures even though his sexual activity surrounding these online escapades caused his wife to question her worth as a person and doubt her sexuality as his lover.

Again, a mother and her twelve-year old daughter were beside themselves when they came to me. The daughter's 13-year old boyfriend had just sent her a text message but the text was a picture instead of words. He was sitting nude in the bathroom and had a full erection. Whatever the boy was thinking, he scared the girl to death, enraged the mother and both were traumatized by the image. In another incident, parents sat in my office and explained that they were beside themselves. They had caught their eight-year old daughter on porn sites. When they asked her why she was looking at these sites, she did not give them much of an answer, but after investigation, they discovered that she had been looking at these sites for several months. "What's wrong with our daughter?" they asked. And finally, a mother called me in tears. She was looking at her 16-year old daughter's Facebook page and noticed that she had made several comments on the bulletin board suggesting that she was ready to kill herself.

“What can we do to protect our daughter?” the mother asked. When they were finally able to locate and talk to her, she explained that she was being bullied by a number of girls who saw her recently diagnosed diabetes as a weakness. “They make me feel like a freak” she cried. They did this, however, not just at school, but they were doing it on the Internet as well. Her phone and her email were filled with hateful messages and ugly pictures belittling her because of her physical condition. They easily sent these pictures to not only her, but her other friends as well, and because of the ease with which these messages are sent, she had received so many that she felt as if the whole school was against her and was beginning to wonder if her life was truly worth living.

While all of these examples raise significant issues from a mental health perspective, it is also important to note that these examples could appear in an ethics book as easily as they could in a text on mental health. Whether we are speaking of compulsive behaviors that bring a young man to lie to his parents, a man visiting porn sites and betraying the trust of his spouse, or incidences of sexting, cyberbullying or pornography so readily available that it is easily accessed by a young child, all of these are ethical issues that are not easily ignored if the trauma created by these behaviors is to be fully addressed. Speaking of adolescent Internet behavior, Williams and Merten (2008) state:

...the Internet is a functioning community involving personal morals and regulatory processes. However, these processes are stunted if adolescents do not see their online activities as subject to any ethical code (256).

The same could and should be said of adults. While many have pointed out the ease with which the Internet erases ethical boundaries because of its anonymity, accessibility and affordability, it is important to our development as human beings if we realize that the digital world is not nor should it be a world where anything goes. As therapists who are supposed to be committed to a more objective and less judgmental perspective, it is important that we not condone an “anything-goes” worldview as we seek to address the issues created by the Internet and the digital world. We help our clients become more fully human as we take on the position of ethicist-therapists and allow our clients, couples and families to address the difficult issues of morality that the digital world brings.

Yet, the times...they are a changing, as Bob Dylan sung. Or, as philosopher Martin Heidegger (1982) long ago argued, to be human is to be a technological being. Technology is an extension of what it means to be human and this is no less true of the technology that forms the backbone of the digital world than it is of a hammer. We are technological beings and ignoring this fact by thinking of digital technology as a tool rather than as a technological transformation of life is to risk being controlled by digital technology rather than forging a critical perspective from which to live successfully in a digital world. The problem is, many of us are “Digital Immigrants.” We grew up in a world of mostly analog technology and now we must learn to navigate a digital world while our children and grandchildren are “Digital Natives”...they know nothing different (N. Herther, 2009)

But what does this have to do with ethics? I think that when we move from an analog world to a digital one our way of being is fundamentally changed and with this change comes the necessity of reformulating how we think about ethics. While I cannot go into details here, the reason I hold this view

has to do with something that lays at the heart of **not only** the digital world, but the world of family therapy as well...systems theory. It is interesting to note that the rise of the modern computer as initiated by the likes of John von Neumann, Norbert Wiener, and Heinz von Foerster corresponds directly with the rise of family therapy as guided by Gregory Bateson, Nathan Ackerman, Murray Bowen, Salvador Minuchin and others, all of whom were responding to and reformulating the general systems theory of Ludwig von Bertalanffy. From a systems perspective, the individual and corresponding self is transformed from an entity unto itself to a system constructed by the systems in which it is immersed. The result is that it is much more difficult to identify the human system as an agential self defined by intentionality compelled by moral obligation. Rather, ethical reflection becomes a reflexive function flowing out of digital discourse. It is because of this that ethics becomes at once more complex and more confusing to the Digital Immigrant whose feet are grounded in an analog world and its corresponding ethics of obligation, while this person's imagination is inspired by what seems to be the fantasy of the digital world. The result is that while digital natives try to pound out moral responsibility from a digital perspective, the digital immigrant treats the digital world as if it were a place of moral license while dismissing digital behaviors as unreal and unrelated to the moral concerns of the analog world. In both cases, the digital world gives rise to what Hans Georg Gadamer (1977) calls a "Horizon of understanding," but the horizon is variously defined depending upon whether one is a digital immigrant or native. What is needed is what Gadamer calls a "fusion of horizons" between the analog and digital world so a hermeneutics of ethical concern might enlighten the behaviors of both the native and the immigrant, while at the same time helping both to more fully understand the reality of virtual and analog worlds. Let me explain.

Even though the man who was "cheating" on his wife with digital images of nude women was a man who was in his mid-30s, he nonetheless professed to be a digital immigrant. While he used computers each day, they represented for him an inconvenience and an intrusion while at work and an escape from his routine when he came home. Virtual reality, he contended, was not real and as long as he maintained that posture, his marriage relationship was in jeopardy. When virtue reality is defined as less than real, then its affect upon us is subliminal and we fall prey to the erasure of boundaries necessary to maintain sound second order realities that provide for the smooth and happy function of family and marriage systems. The man failed to understand that his behavior was not isolated to himself and was beginning to effect change in the family system that shifted family boundaries defining not only his wife, but his son and his daughter resulting in extreme dysfunctionality within the family system, conflict between he and his wife and aberrant behavior in his son. To counter this, it was imperative to effect a fusion of horizons that made it impossible to deny the reality of his virtual activities as well as the digital images that he viewed and the behaviors they evoked. Put differently, virtual sex was not isolated to him, but was something that was affecting his relationship to his wife as well as his son, his son's relationship to his friends and his son's success at school.

To counter this, it is important that he understand the wider systems in which he was immersed and the way they affected his relationships with family, work and friends. Using a genogram, I began to diagram the different systems of which he was a part treating the digital world as real as were his relationship to his wife and children. The images he was viewing—the virtual women—were diagramed and depicted

in the same way others were depicted and relational lines were drawn between the virtual women, the man, his wife and his children. Another important part of the couple's life was their religious convictions, and circles and squares represented their family of faith and how they related to this virtual experience. As we developed these diagrams, a fusion of horizons was affected that caused a new horizon of understanding to develop within the man and his wife. The result was second order change. Neither the man nor the woman shunned the digital world. They were both very much immersed in it at home—their children are digital natives—and their work cannot be separated from the digital world. Instead, they learned to navigate the digital/analog fusion and quit treating one as if it were more real than the other. In this way, their ethics, based in large part on their religion, was brought to bear on both the analog and digital world. The boundaries in one became the boundaries for the other, and the aberrant behaviors of the man began to subside. Not only did their relationship become healthier, but it also became much more ethical in the process.

The case of the young man whose parents thought he was addicted to digital games was similar, yet very different. The young man was a digital native and his parents were digital immigrants, the immigration status of whom the young man denied. Again, it was important for both the parents and the son to evoke a fusion of horizons, the parents' fusion moving towards a more conscious acknowledgement of the virtues of the digital world, and the son's movement towards an acknowledgement of his parents' immigration status. Again, through family therapy I attempted to provide a context in which such a shift could take place. The young man's father was rather inflexible in his attitudes and demands upon his son were formulated in what he called a "Plan for Quality," a list of rules defining his expectations that were as stifling as they were demanding. In light of this, his son wilted. The mother, on the other hand, was not quite as inflexible. Defining an alliance between the son and the mother, I worked to evoke more flexibility in the plan with some success, but the son was not satisfied. This structure, he insisted, made him out to be a slave and he thought he should have more freedom. According to him, his mom and dad, being analog people, did not understand how oppressive they were being.

The result of our work was that a shift did take place and some of the rules were relaxed, but the son still felt as if he were a slave. In a digital world, he contended, there would be no such rules. As the son understood his world, good and bad were relativized to the desires of the digital native. Again, this was akin to an "anything goes" code of behavior, a code of behavior that irritated his parents and was the reason for the plan for quality. By helping the parents to understand that through digital games as well as social network sites, youth begin to play with identities important to the developmental tasks of adolescence, and by helping the son to realize that such work included the definition of values and ethical behaviors that define not only his relationship to his parents but his friends as well, I worked to evoke a fusion of horizons that led to a greater understanding of the digital world and the place of ethical virtues within it. The result was a subtle shift in the family structure that resulted in more responsible behavior from the son and a softening of the stifling rules imposed upon him by his parents. The shift was not as great as I would have hoped, but the small shift that took place led to a more functional family structure with far less tension than had existed previous to that time. The point for us,

however, is that again, virtues and ethical responsibility was addressed as an important part of the therapeutic process.

I do not have time to address the other examples I gave. Suffice it to say, however, that sexting, cyberbullying and the porn sites visited by young children are, I believe, symptoms of a lack of the fusion of horizons that leads to successfully navigating the different and complex systemic changes in our world evoked by digital technology. Because of its novelty, its rapid change and the unique way that digital technology erases and redraws boundaries, it is important that society not dismiss the shift that comes as the analog world begins to fade further into the background, and the digital world becomes more and more the defining factor in the function and structure of society as a whole. We who are the digital immigrants ignore this to the peril of our children and grandchildren—the digital natives. The role of helping people to understand this shift is the responsibility of many, including educators, philosophers, legal professionals and ethicists. It is also the responsibility of family therapists whose training in systems theory gives them a powerful way of helping others bring about the fusion of horizons necessary to responsibly and ethically navigate the digital world, the reality of which is more difficult to deny with each passing day. Indeed, it may be argued that if family therapists do their job effectively, they will not ignore the demands of ethical realities, but embrace them as an effective way of bridging the gap between those who are digital natives and those who are the immigrants. Family therapists, then, are important players in the task of defining goodness in the world of tomorrow.

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