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Always On?

Ethical and Political Dimensions of Mobile Communication Technologies

New mobile technologies open up multiple possibilities for greater individual and collective good – and for ill. Whether more sensational (e.g., “happy slapping” videos) or more reflective (e.g., worries about surveillance), many of the ethical and political concerns evoked by these technologies turn on how these transform traditional (Western) public-private distinctions – and, potentially, modern Western conceptions of the self. In particular, the ethically *autonomous* self as constructed in *privacy*, in part through the communication technologies of *literacy* and *print*, is a core assumption and justification of modern Western democracies. As “always on” via new mobile technologies, however, we may be shifting towards a *relational* self, one defined by his / her relationships with others as developed primarily through the various forms of *orality* emphasized in mobile devices. Such a development is promising for a *global* ethics, insofar as it brings modern Western conceptions into greater resonance with more traditional and non-Western understandings. But this shift may also threaten core assumptions of modern Western democratic polity.

We will further explore how far extant ethical frameworks (utilitarianism, deontology, and feminist, Buddhist, and Confucian variants of virtue ethics) may – or may not – resolve additional ethical matters evoked by these new technologies.

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