Ethics in E-business
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Stijn Bijnens, a former teacher of Lovaina and executive chairman of a successful company dedicated to Internet security, stated not long ago: "Fraud on the Internet is easy because it can be automated". By way of example, he then cited the creation of a programme which transfers insignificant amounts from many different places into one account.

The ethical aspect of online business is certainly wider and more complex than just automated fraud, but I believe that the statement quoted includes one of the keys to ethics applied to e-business.

On the one hand, we have the concept of "fraud", a well-known type of crime which has always been classified as morally reproachable. On the other hand we have the term "automate", which is, in essence, the application of technical means to an activity in order for it to be carried out repetitively and by itself. The automated technology used by computers and on the Internet allows the carrying out of specific actions which up until now were impossible, or at least improbable.

This is generally true of some of the ethical questions which the Internet raises with regards to well-known ethical misdemeanours. An example could be the massive attacks launched against portals or corporate web pages or the computer viruses, which are a means of boycott, the advertising of online products which are very different to the real ones, which is indeed a form of commercial misrepresentation, the e-mailing of unsolicited advertisements which are difficult to filter and which can be considered an unjust invasion of one's private life (as is also the case when we are phoned at home and offered unsolicited products), and also the different procedures used to usurp intellectual property or destroy confidentiality.

It appears that ethics in e-business represent merely one particular case of general ethical misdemeanours. However, this idea is too simplistic. I am certainly aware that there are universal ethical principles, but e-business requires specific criteria. These criteria will be reached through the development of these principles, with the help of many conceptual clarifications, detailed analyses and rigorous discussions.

It should also be remembered that ethics, contrary to what is usually believed, do not deal exclusively nor principally with insurmountable minimums, but rather are orientated towards human excellence. In this sense, ethics leads us to ask how the net can be used to benefit society and, principally, its users and receivers.
Responding to this question involves, among other things, studying the contents and procedures used in e-business, analysing the motivating effects it has on people and determining whether the dedication required for this task may be to the detriment of other more ethically important issues.

It is also important to have in-depth knowledge of the characteristics of the related links generated in e-business and of the nature of the online communities they produce and, above all, to know what is the best way to serve people, and society, using the net.

E-business ethics are unique due to the condition and intention of the users and due to the effects of the acts carried out.

Intention, one of the basic ethical elements when evaluating the morality of an action, can present important differences with regards to the acts commonly studied in business ethics. Virus creation and hacker activity are not always due to the wish to obtain economic benefit or to increase power within an organisation. They are often based on the need for people to test themselves or to show their creativity or intellectual ability, to enjoy themselves, to compete with other hackers or even to show the insecurity of a system.

These intentions obviously do not make the acts legitimate, but they do offer another aspect to be taken into consideration. At the same time, it introduces a psychological element which has an influence on the hackers' perception of morality.

When their intention is not to take advantage of others or to harm them (even though they do indeed cause great harm), the moral consciousness of wrongdoing is less clear than when acting in order to harm others or to steal from them. Other factors which contribute to this are the anonymity and the fact that "virtual" fraud can have a lesser emotional burden than fraud or swindles carried out on known persons.

The effects resulting from acts on the net can also be greater than those we are used to. We should also take into account the characteristics of the victims, who can be from a wide range of ages, cultures and sensibilities. No less important is the way the act may induce others, whether positively or negatively, an aspect which is becoming more relevant due to the rapid distribution of information.

Companies should promote their sense of responsibility. More than ever, they should act to promote good and not only due to fear of the law. Nor should they forget that their own network will send genuine messages and transactions which may or may not be trusted. Values such as veracity, authenticity and respect for other persons and for different cultural sensibilities shall be of great importance. These shall be translated into the information provided and into the way products on the net and in the real world are targeted towards customers and potential buyers.

The development of ethics in e-business is necessary but will require time. It will not be merely the result of intellectual lucubration, rather it will emerge from studying and reflecting on many real cases. Its development will provide an important educational element which, as it is implanted, will help net users to become more and more conscious.