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## UNIT 10: NEW MEDIA AND ETHICAL ISSUES

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### 10.0 INTRODUCTION

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The advent of new technology has opened up a world of information for us. Internet, the World Wide Web, Smartphones, mobile applications etc., have made us familiar with terms such as New Media. Earlier, the distinction between new and old or traditional media was clear, but the constantly evolving technology has forced us to rethink the definition of new media. We have come a long way from a one-dimensional definition of the concept. New media is a broad term that carries multiple meanings and interpretations. Using new technologies and advanced devices for communication has created a scenario where we are constantly consuming online content. Today we spend much more time being 'logged on' than we have ever done.

New media is not only changing the way we interact with our surroundings; it is also dictating 'how' we do it. It facilitates sharing in a number of ways, including text, video, pictures, graphs, illustrations, audio etc., asking each user to engage with the online content more deeply and uniquely. The user

has to be able to make sense of all this information and understand the pitfalls of communicating online.

There is a range of activities such as emailing, video sharing, social networking, virtual gaming, and even hacking that can be done online. There are unseen attacks such as hacking, phishing and trolling that make our experience of the online world uncomfortable. Law means legal rules used to govern a country's matters. The Indian Penal Code defines the Indian penal system, and the Information Act 2000 is the guiding principle for new media in India. The IT Act and its subsequent amendment in 2008 take care of defamation, libel and slander apart from more serious online crimes such as phishing and fraud. But the huge amount of data uploaded cannot be controlled by laws alone, and the need of the hour is to understand new media ethics.

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## 10.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

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After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- describe the different aspects of new media ethics;
- discuss the importance and challenges related to it;
- explore the responsibilities of users while accessing or downloading content; and
- use new media with greater care in your personal and public online conduct.

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## 10.2 DEFINITION OF NEW MEDIA ETHICS

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New Media ethics define how we behave online and help us decide about our 'netiquettes'. These are required because the information is being exchanged quickly and in huge amounts. Both consumers and producers of new media need to be aware of their ethical limitations in the online world. While there are legal rights to protect content creators, the policies for the consumers of online content are in nascent stages.

A great deal of content is being created online. It is important that the Internet remains open, transparent and protects the rights of individuals who contribute to the sharing and exchange of knowledge. This allows them to create content freely and fosters creativity while making knowledge accessible to everyone. The temptation to copy or modify easily available content is difficult to fight. The ownership, privacy, confidentiality and intellectual property need to be respected in virtual life just like in our real life.

Therefore new media ethics can simply be described as a set of ethical considerations that define our conduct online. New media ethics tell us how to appropriately use new media without breaching any law or infringing on the online rights of other users. They provide a model code for creators, distributors and users of online content.

Collaborative websites such as Wikis and YouTube, social media sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Weibo and Twitter are all running with the help of user-generated content. Individuals who are reading the content also share,

exchange, add-on and publish the data they come across and thus end up becoming the consumer and producers. This is unlike any other medium, e.g. we use Facebook to share pictures and 'like' pictures found on our friends' walls, thereby creating data. Thus, new media users need to be protected from ethical violations as producers and creators of information. Let us first try to understand their responsibilities as creators.

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## 10.3 RIGHTS AND ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF CONTENT CREATORS

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The Copyright Law protects individuals from having their work copied in an unauthorised way. In contrast, the Information Technology Amendment Act 2008 has a small section dedicated to dealing with cyber crimes such as sharing obscene material or impersonating on the Internet. Since the laws have not evolved as fast as the medium itself, it becomes imperative to follow the ethical guidelines strictly.

### 10.3.1 Understanding Digital Rights and Creative Commons

Digital Rights have become very important in this information age. The rights of both the content creator and consumer or reader need to be protected. There are many challenges here as consumers on the Internet are mostly prosumers (producer + consumer). They have to watch out for ethical violations both as creators and consumers of online content. Since establishing ownership is easier, the content creator's rights are always discussed more fervently. New techniques collectively referred to as Digital Rights Management (DRM) have evolved to protect these. They make it difficult to duplicate access or distribute data in an unauthorised way. We see some common techniques in everyday life: copy control, access control, and digital watermarking. When we use a watermark, there is a link to the original work embedded somewhere within the text to guide the reader to the original work. One can see websites where only a part of the information is free while one needs to be either a member or a paid subscriber to access the text, such as Google Books, SAGE etc. Some software controls are also designed to disable any copying and thereby automatically prevent data reproduction. More sophisticated techniques involve data encryption. The data is jumbled up and pieced together only by authorised persons with the decryption key, much like a jigsaw puzzle.

The major issues with respect to new media ethics for content creators are:

- Ownership and Copyright
- Open vs Free content and Content sharing
- Privacy and other ethical issues

### 10.3.2 Ownership Issues

The web shows information readily and what we need is available at one click. This is also true for pictures, music, graphics, songs and any other information that we seek. But that also throws up a concern about protecting our rights as creative people. Though the Copyright Law legally protects us, we are ethically bound by ownership and copyright issues on the web. There are new forms of copyright available online now.

### 10.3.3 Copyright Infringement

There are a lot of websites offering paid content online. This is done to ensure that artists/writers contributing content are compensated and motivated to contribute further. But some file-sharing companies allow illegal downloading and sharing of files that lead to piracy. The rampant music piracy or copying of digital goods such as audio files, videos, reports, articles and such without the consent of the person who holds the copyright is a major problem. As users, we tend to become careless about copy-pasting desired information and infringing upon fellow netizens' copyright.

### 10.3.4 Open Content vs Free Content

David Wiley has specified that online content can be both open and free. It is important to distinguish between the two. Any content available online that can be accessed, revised, reused, redistributed, remixed and retained for later use is referred to as open content. This means that the online content need not be 'open' even if it is free, implying that free content is not the same as 'open' content. Because free means one can access the content free of cost, but 'open' means users are free to download, edit and share the content without any ethical or legal limitations. Free content allows individuals to use and benefit from it, make and distribute its copies, study and apply it or even distribute its derivative works.

The problem of creating ethical guidelines for the Internet has risen because it is a relatively new medium. There is a vast amount of content floating around on the Internet, and there are many conventions that define our ethical boundaries with respect to using the content available online. The automatic copyright of the content posted online lasts for 70 years, after which it becomes available for public use. But new types of copyright licensing available online now tell us how a particular content should be used. Creative Commons is one such organisation working on the idea of providing people access to creative work and intellectual property while giving them a right to choose the conditions of making that work available to consumers. In simple terms, whenever a user puts up any fresh piece of information online, he/she can specify the way it has to be used by mentioning if the material is free for modification/download/sharing etc. or partly available/ not available. This is done via symbols and attributions that have now come to be used commonly on the Internet.

These guidelines are helpful in understanding how one must use content available online. However, it should be noted that licenses issued by Creative Commons are not a substitute for copyright. The table as an Annexure of this Unit explains the different types of copyrights from Creative Commons.

#### Check Your Progress: 1

**Note:** 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1. Define new media ethics.

.....  
 .....

- 2. What does Digital Rights Management mean?

.....  
.....

- 3. Distinguish between Open and Free Content.

.....  
.....

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## 10.4 CONTENT CURATION AND LIMITS TO SHARING

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The content writing style often keeps changing, and these days the major emerging trend is that of content curation. It is defined as a process of sorting, arranging and publishing data related to a specific theme together so that the reader gets more information about the same topic without having to click through multiple sites.

The work of curators is to pick the most relevant content and exhibit it so that a quick glance reveals the most relevant links at one place itself. It is unlike a search engine because here, the curator adds some inputs about the content to give the reader an idea about what the text carries and why they should click it.

There is a thin line between highlighting someone’s content and presenting it as your own. While curating the content, the appropriate links and credits must be provided along with the text. Though giving an embedded link to the original text is within permissible copyright limits, it could be misleading for the readers, causing an ethical violation. Therefore, the curators must make strong efforts to mention the original source and links explicitly.

### 10.4.1 Privacy and other ethical issues

The ethical constraints of content producers are also limited to the extent that they should not upload, distribute, share or misuse any content such as photographs, videos, music, articles, books, or any intellectual property acquired physically or virtually without the consent of the individual concerned. However, we often find a rampant violation of this basic new media ethic. Personal information of friends, relatives and acquaintances is often shared online without seeking explicit approval of the people in question.

### 10.4.2 News related ethical issues

All the content on news websites may not come from reliable sources and can also be inaccurate. In such cases, it is prudent that the users be informed when a news item is less reliable or has only been edited after taking from another source. This helps them to be better prepared to handle such information. In the case of images, new end technologies have facilitated easy capturing, sharing and transmission of data. Also, in many cases, the news may not be verified, or wrong images could appear besides stories, thus requiring the reader to be discerning.

The reports generated through anonymous sources and hoax data are also commonplace. During the second season of IPL, a blog named ‘Fake IPL

Player' was started. The anonymous writer was believed to be a Kolkata Knight Riders team member but could not be identified. Only after the writing caught international attention and garnered, a huge number of visitors did the blogger's identity get revealed. Before that, the team management had taken measures like curbing internet access and banning laptops from stopping the posts. This is the downside of information coming in through new media. It is impossible to ascertain the source and authenticity of the information correctly.

The problem is also faced by news employees who want to share their thoughts online. The companies are often not open to allowing this since it can lead to all kinds of problems. For instance, remarks of a person about a group or community could be hurtful and incite violence ending up spoiling the company's reputation. To avoid this, many companies have now come up with clear guidelines so that their employees can use social media fearlessly. They often spell this out as 'Social Media Policy. The leading publication Los Angeles Times has drawn up a social media policy for this very reason. It says that:

1. Principles of integrity, professionalism, privacy and impartiality should be observed by journalists when posting online.
2. The authenticity of what employees post is important. Online journalists should verify questionable content with credible sources before posting or tweeting about it.
3. It is important for employees to properly define their association with the publication as they would do offline.

Some companies such as Adidas go one step ahead and give clear instructions to the employees, as outlined below:

1. Employees are allowed to associate themselves with the company when posting, but they must clearly brand their online posts as personal and purely their own. The company should not be held liable for any repercussions the employees' content may generate.
2. Content pertaining to sensitive company information (particularly those found within Adidas internal networks) should not be shared with the outside online community. Divulging information like the company's design plans, internal operations and legal matters are prohibited.
3. Proper copyright and reference laws should be observed by employees when posting online.

Thus it is clear that both content producers and readers need to have a system of checks and balances for their online behaviour. Their etiquettes cannot be controlled but can be guided with the help of social media policies, and drawing up ethical guidelines etc.

### **10.4.3 Ethics for online marketers**

Since users are increasingly connected with each other and keep sharing intimate information online, the marketers often reach them through advertisements that are specifically targeted as per their browsing history. This is done through cookies that track the data of users. They not only spoil the experience of the users but are considered unethical. The use of

hidden hyperlinks and contextual link ads is very annoying. There are also instances of companies floating paid reviews and sponsoring content that is favourable for them. This creates positive reviews for the product but is a gross violation of ethics since it is misleading for the readers. Sometimes malicious content appears in the form of pop up ads/ alerts, in-app clicks or download links. They may turn out to be viruses. The users need to take special care when dealing with such content.

Search engine optimisation is also used as a technique to gain users' attention. However, this is used indiscriminately to redirect users to the same sites repeatedly.

As per the **Institute of Advertising Ethics (IAE):**

- “All forms of advertising material must share the common goal of maintaining the truth and should be a means to serve the public.
- They should maintain a clear distinction between corporate communications, press releases, sales collateral and advertisements.
- A publisher must disclose every condition upfront and clearly, as the asterisks (\*) and fine print at the end of the document can sometimes go unnoticed by the consumer.
- If cookies are being used to track and detect a user's settings, personal record and online activity, then this must be clearly stated before the user begins browsing your site.
- The placement of ads should not obstruct the user view, nor should they be disguised as editorial content.
- Finally, whether you are selling online or offline, advertisers must abide by the federal, state and local advertising laws.”

**Check Your Progress: 2**

**Note:** 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1. What are the responsibilities of content creators in the online world?  
.....  
.....
2. How can one become more alert towards personal data being published online?  
.....  
.....
3. Why is social media policy important in the present context?  
.....  
.....

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## 10.5 RIGHTS AND ETHICS OF ONLINE READERS

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It is not just the content creators who need to be restricted by ethical boundaries; there are unwritten protocols for readers. Something as innocent

as ‘liking’ a page or tweeting on a trending topic can sometimes lead to a violation of online ethics due to the nature of the content. Other issues facing readers are cyber disinhibition, inadvertent self-disclosure, cybercrimes such as bullying, doxing, phishing etc. On the consumers’ end, especially social media users, the invasion of privacy is not fully understood.

Readers in the online world are still unaware of the data trails they willingly give into the hands of internet service providers and are thus falling into a situation where they have no control over their own data. The disclosure problem is compounded by the lack of awareness among Internet and new media users, which can lead to invasion of privacy.

The companies often dictate the terms of service and privacy policies of social networking sites as per their requirement, and readers have little or no say in changing them. They are also unaware of their virtual identities and how data-mining firms are being used.

Similarly, social networking sites often collect information and share it with third-party users. Still, users cannot control this since failure to accept these policies often results in being unable to sign up or access these sites and applications.

Thus, we reveal much more about ourselves online than we had planned to simply because we do not care to go through the privacy settings or disclosure agreements while downloading apps or accessing social media. The least a user can do is read and understand these carefully and limit the amount and type of personal information they upload. The increasing cyber disinhibition or the loosening of social restrictions and inhibitions in the virtual world is a major cause of ethical and legal violations.

#### **Activity – 1**

Check the privacy settings of the social networking site of your choice and list its salient features.

### **10.5.1 Instances of Ethical Violations**

The new media is a powerful tool to reach out to people, but it is sometimes misused for personal attacks, running malicious campaigns with intended or unintended consequences. Trolling, cyber vandalism and smear campaigns are mounted on the Internet to garner quick support.

Sometimes these incidents go out of hand and create gross ethical and legal violations. For example, the pictures of the brutal murder of a northeastern student in the Munirka area of Delhi were shared online without any respect for the privacy of the individual or his family’s consent. Similarly, leaked pictures of film stars holidaying abroad caused a lot of annoyance to the persons concerned. In the above cases, we can hold the person who circulated the pictures legally guilty, but people who came across the pictures and shared them further indulged in gross ethical violations. In case any content being circulated on the net is found to be objectionable, it must be reported to the particular site and the authorities so that necessary action may be taken.

Another ethical violation is the trend of shaming videos. These are videos where people are humiliated with punishments such as chopping off the



hair, beating etc., as punishment and are recorded to be uploaded online with the motive of promoting online embarrassment. There have been reports of kids, teenagers and even adults feeling suicidal after their shaming videos came online. This disturbing trend also includes videos of pet shaming. Though they are intended to serve as a punishment, such videos often go 'viral' and can affect the mental and social health of persons concerned.

People of all age groups use the Internet, and not all users are discerning enough to understand the consequences of the data they may share online. Anything once posted on the Internet remains there forever and can be dug up any time later and cause embarrassment. Therefore we must be extra careful in putting up or sharing our pictures with friends and colleagues.

We often find the abusive and derogatory language used on web page comment sections, chat rooms and social networking sites, etc. This type of trolling results from disinhibition or breaking down of socio-cultural norms in the virtual world. Another big threat is the addiction to these sites. The overuse of apps and social networking sites is causing an alarming situation where the addicted users are psychologically more dependent on their virtual identities than on real-world scenarios. The ubiquitous 'selfie' also becomes a menace at times. Clicking a selfie at any and every minute of the day is not a crime. However, how, where and when it is clicked decides whether there has been an ethical violation or not. The former U.S. President Barak Obama faced a lot of flak for clicking a selfie at the funeral of Nelson Mandela.

As we look at the advent of the 'Internet of things, i.e., devices connected with the Internet that can be remotely operated, the responsibility of using the technology in a better way has also increased manifold.

### **10.5.2 Do's and Don't's of New Media Ethics**

The guidelines for 'netiquette' are very simple. When we post something in relation to a text, we should point to the original text while commenting so that our post is not taken out of context. It is important that we are careful while posting any data online, and before doing it, one must consider the long term consequences.

We should be sensitive to the online readers who may represent different beliefs, sensibilities and cultures. If we have committed a mistake, we must immediately apologise and remove the concerned posted text. We should be gracious in disagreements too. Expressing any negative opinion online on a public forum can disturb any individual. Below is a list of things one can do to prevent unethical practices online.

#### **Do's and Dont's of New Media Ethics**

- "Do not open messages from strangers.
- Do not forward messages/rumours without first verifying the claims
- Do not impersonate individuals or secure their passwords through unauthorised means
- Never send pictures to strangers
- Avoid downloading copies of pirated software or movies, songs etc.
- Respect the privacy of others, just as you expect the same from others.

- Do not use other users’ computer resources without their permission.
- Use the Internet ethically.
- Complain about illegal communication and activities, if found, to Internet Service providers and local law enforcement authorities.
- Users should not intentionally use the computers to retrieve or modify the information of others, which may include password information, files, etc.”

### 10.5.3 Dealing with Ethical Violations

There are many pitfalls as far as ethical violations are concerned. Users may end up causing a lot of these and may choose to remain ignorant about them. For example, piracy of movies, TV shows and songs is very commonplace. People who download files through torrents or other means are well aware that they are causing ethical violations, but they do not think of it as a wrong practice. The Internet, which has facilitated many activities, has also heightened possibilities of falling into a ‘cut-copy-paste’ trap.

The foremost thing is that we should double-check the data we post online and be critical, observant and watchful while sharing content or talking to strangers. We should also encourage our acquaintances and friends to point out any inadvertent errors or mistakes we might have committed. As users of new media, we need to understand the constantly changing online world and figure out how to deal with emerging ethical challenges. We also need to draw up policies to ensure no conflict of interest between content creators and consumers online. The users need to be more aware of new crimes being committed online. Above all, we need to be aware of new media ethics and be willing participants in making the Internet a more productive, responsible and decent place for all users.

**Activity – 2**

Identify a recent instance of ethical violation on the Internet and discuss how it could have been prevented.

**Check Your Progress: 3**

**Note:** 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1. What can readers do to safeguard their online experience?

.....  
 .....

2. How can online ethical violations be prevented?

.....  
 .....

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## 10.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit, we started with the definition of New Media ethics which were described as ethical considerations that define our conduct online that help us interact with people. We then moved on to the rights and responsibilities in the

online world in which it was explained that there are ethical considerations both as creators and receivers of information. The legal part is taken care of by Digital Rights Management, Copyright laws and Intellectual property rights. However, the ethical part is a lot more complex and is dealt with by a combination of different mechanisms such as Creative Commons and Social media policies. An important aspect of understanding online ethics and using content over the web is to learn to differentiate between 'open' and 'free' content. These were discussed in detail, along with some ethical violations and how these can be handled effectively.

Some guidelines for new media use and a roadmap for online conduct were outlined in the unit. Through the discussion, a strong need for awareness among 'netizens' regarding their rights and responsibilities in the online world and social media policies were emphasised.

It was stressed that new media users need to be careful about their personal and public conduct in the online space. This can be achieved by understanding the ethical constraints of new media users.

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## 10.9 KEYWORDS

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**New media ethics:** Ethical guidelines for online behaviour.

**Netiquettes:** Convention for communicating in cyberspace is made from the word etiquette colloquially meaning ‘good manners’.

**Wikis:** Open and Collaborative content that is user-generated and can be edited by anybody.

**Cyber Disinhibition:** the phenomenon of breaking down of social and moral codes of conduct in the virtual world.

**Content Curation:** It is the manual sorting and arrangement of data available online so that the reader gets all related text in one place itself. This saves the reader time and provides customised yet varied content to readers without going through various links and websites.

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## 10.10 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

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### Check Your Progress: 1

1. New media ethics are ethical considerations that define users’ online conduct. These help the consumers appropriately use new media technologies without infringing the rights of other users or breaking any laws.
2. Digital Rights Management (DRM) has evolved to protect the rights of online content creators. This help prevents the unauthorised duplication, access and distribution of data. Copy control, Access Control, and digital watermarking are some of the ways used for this.
3. Open content is online content that can be accessed, revised, reused, redistributed, remixed and retained for later use. At the same time, free content can be accessed without paying a fee but cannot be edited, revised or reused further.

### Check Your Progress: 2

1. While using content, one should provide appropriate links and credits along with the text and explicitly mention the source. They should also not upload, distribute, share or misuse any content such as photographs, videos, music, articles, books, or any other intellectual property acquired physically or virtually without the consent of the individual concerned.
2. Personal information of friends, relatives and acquaintances is often shared online without seeking their explicit approval. One must respect the privacy and copyright of others while publishing content online.
3. Social media is designed to be an easy-to-use system for voicing our opinions. But there is a need to be aware of the new kind of dangers it exposes us to. Social media policies define the limits of actions that

can be performed on social media and thus help us follow responsible online behaviour - both as content producers and users.

### Check Your Progress: 3

1. Social networking sites often collect information and share it with third party users. Although users cannot control this, it is prudent to go through the privacy settings or disclosure agreements while downloading apps or accessing social media. The user should read and understand these carefully and limit the amount and type of personal information they upload.
2. We should double-check the data we post online and be critical, observant and watchful while sharing content or talking to strangers. We should also encourage our acquaintances and friends to point out any inadvertent errors or mistakes we might have committed.

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