

Homophily vs the Generalized Other

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Abstract

Most recent academic studies of homophily—the tendency of people to interact with similar others—lean to a sociological critique of digital technologies, rather than revealing fundamentally positive outcomes. A few solid philosophical endeavors have emerged from the fields of philosophy of technology and enactive ethics. This article adopts a sociological perspective to argue that digital social networks can serve as an ethical infrastructure for facilitating effective communication. However, they also face the challenge of organizing the myriad of individual voices present within them, so that the necessary moral conditions to mitigate homophily can be established. From this viewpoint, it is suggested homophily should be viewed not as an individual's right to expression but as a cultivated echo-moral cultured landscape. Homophily is not an input but an outcome. Homophily does not happen without evaluating reception. A voice without assessment lacks the ethical dimension. By applying the theory of the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 2008), homophily can be conceived as the contribution of *significant others*. Most importantly, effective communication can be attained when new secondary institutions organize the input of *significant others* into a meaningful *generalized other* (Mead, 2015). As a result, I propose that digital technologies allow for ameliorating the moral character of the individual by shifting how one looks at communication: from an individual's right to a voice into an ordered culture of *voices*, from preserving rights to serving rightly. This perspective could illuminate policymakers to establish right processes to avoid homophily and help individuals and organizations achieve effective means of communication and deliberation.

Keywords

Significant other, Generalized other, Peter L. Berger, Thomas Luckmann, Sociology of knowledge, George H. Mead

Introduction

Homophily—or the tendency of individuals to interact with others similar to themselves regarding attributes such as social status, values, beliefs, or attitudes—appears to be of equal concern for scholars, businesses, governments, and users of the digital space alike. Each of these stakeholders

seek to understand and assess the impact of the digital environment to safeguard and support their respective endeavors. The homophily hereby referred was originally defined as the “tendency for friendships to form between those who are alike in some designated respect” (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954, p. 23). As digital technologies undeniably enhance individual sociability, it becomes paramount

to investigate the prevailing type of *philia*¹ in these relationships. Moreover, the constant use of social networks—Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, Tinder, or X (formerly known as Twitter)—in the various aspects of the individual's *lifeworld*² activities—including work, school, family, or friendship—gives rise to new forms of relationships that, in turn, shape their moral character. The study of the nature of homophily gains even greater relevance today in the imminent scenario of the Internet of Things and the Metaverse, where individuals must also develop new interactions with millions of objects. For this reason, as digital relationships continue to grow exponentially, the academic world strives to anticipate the tendency and ethical consequences stemming from these new modes of *philia*.

This article aims to show that digital social networks converge to an ideal ethical structure to mitigate homophily and foster a selfless type of communication. I affirm that the *infraethics*—a term coined by Floridi (2017)—embedded within these digital structures signify progress in countering homophily. I hereby use the concept to refer to “the accepted ways of living together in terms of economic, political, and social conditions such as the rule of law, respect for civil rights, a sense of political community, civilized dialogue among differently minded people, ways to reach peaceful resolutions of tensions and so forth” (Floridi, 2017, p. 392). Digital networks serve as sociopolitical structures that enable individuals to engage in pragmatic, *selfless* communication, sharing information without regard for personal affinities (*philia*). I propose that selfless communication occurs when the individual's ego does not interfere and allow the nature of the information to be shaped through deliberate and pragmatic collective action. This perspective on selfless communication eschews the application of moral theories and instead recognizes that individual existence is bound to a space in which individuals exist, interact, and evolve. The emergence of digital technologies has expanded this social realm, proving that “the social world [...] is not static. On the contrary, it changes, for example, from generation to generation” (Griselda Lopez, 2021, p. 191). Recognizing this expansion, this article intends to offer a new perspective from which ethically desirable infrastructures can be envisioned. It does not aim to

provide specific design solutions but rather to present a potential conceptual framework for devising them.

The literature on homophily in social networks is extensive and diverse. Among the different fields that have researched the subject, I contend that the contributions of sociologists and philosophers are especially relevant for examining the evolution of *philia*—a sociological inquiry in its own right—in cyberspace. To that end, I have first drawn inspiration and general knowledge from scholars such as Miller McPherson, Eva-Maria Düringer, and Marc Esteve-Del-Valle. Structuring the literature review around three categories that align with the concept of *selfless pragmatic communication* proves useful. In the first category, which centers on *selflessness*, I find relevance in the work of authors who explore concepts such as *inadvertent exposure* and *lack of autonomy* (Brundidge, Verbeek). In the second category, which delves into the communication aspect of homophily, of significance are the work of authors who assess the participatory meaning-making process from the perspectives of *enactivism*³ or *platform studies* (Marin, Gillespie). In the third and final category, and so as to evaluate the pragmatic dimension of communication, are those works that examine the *political* and *ethical* consequences of the public sphere (Dijck, Verbeek). It is important to note that these three categories do not exist in isolation; instead, numerous ideas traverse the same uncharted digital terrain, generating interconnected insights across the scholarship.

The literature review reveals three primary findings. First, there appears to be evidence of a loss of autonomy experienced by the individual, leading to suspended judgment and behaviors suggestive of moral desensitization. Second, the exploration of enactivism highlights the potential for “participatory *sense-making* online” (Marin, 2022, p. 429; italics added for emphasis), providing the individual with opportunities for unexpected encounters shaping new semantic territories. Third, the imperative to structure the public space imposes a responsibility on scholars to evaluate the ethics of *philia*, recognizing that the cyber-individual is navigating new relationships influenced by technology. These nascent *philias* require individuals to cultivate a new moral attunement to be able to cope with the evolving demands of interaction.

1 The word *philia* is used in this text to denote the nature of affection or friendship underlining any relationship.

2 *Lifeworld* or *Lebenswelt* is a concept originally proposed by Edmund Husserl in 1936. It was later used by Alfred Schütz and his disciples Berger and Luckmann to refer to the social experience of the reality of everyday life: an unquestionable reality that imposes itself on consciousness. A reality impossible to ignore and forces the individual to be attentive to it in the fullest way.

3 Enactivism is the area of Philosophy that studies the nature of technology and its social effects. It is used here in its most general sense to include other areas of interest for this research: ethics of information, philosophy of information, Internet studies, technologies of information, and similar.

In summary, the studies suggest that homophily is significantly influenced by two variables: the individual's loss of autonomy and their entry into new semantic territories characterized by moral desensitization. Despite sharing many of these ideas, the current literature appears to be overly focused on the negative aspects of philia. Moreover, it seems to have reached a plateau whereby it acknowledges that "we do not have a sufficiently precise language for attending to these kinds of interventions and their consequences" (Gillespie, 2010, p. 13). Furthermore, there is a recognition that "a new approach is needed to gain insight into how current technological, commercial, and cultural changes affect contentious communication" (Van Dijck & Poell, 2016, p. 227). To fill this lacuna, then, the paper proposes a positive reinterpretation to examine homophily.

Homophily is examined through the lens of the sociology of knowledge, a theory that explains the processes by which one's social relationships contribute to establishing knowledge as reality. Berger and Luckmann (2008, p. 81) assert that "the social world, as a humanly produced reality, is potentially understandable in a way not possible in the case of the natural world." Although this theory has undergone refinement over the past 50 years to demonstrate how various other factors—language, collective intentionality, power, and technology—contribute to the construction of knowledge and reality, I have selected Berger and Luckmann's perspective because of its foundation in Schütz's concept of *intersubjectivity*—itself inherited from Husserl, and key to understanding homophily. Drawing on Schütz's disciples' theory, I employ the ideas presented in their work *The Social Construction of Reality* (TSCR, 2008) to interpret the moral transformations induced by the novel philia relationships emerging in the digital space. This approach views homophily not merely as an individual's right to expression but as an echo-moral creation. It suggests that homophily is not an input but an outcome. It presumes that a voice without assessment lacks attention to ethical and political dimensions.

This proposal navigates between two prominent contributions that, in my view, stand out in the realm of homophily studies. The first is the work by Van Dijck and Poell (2016), which challenges the organization of the public space. The second is Verbeek's (2015) exploration of the ethics of things, which recognizes the affordances of communication modes that individuals may be unable to perceive. While acknowledging the valuable insights of both authors and, to some extent, sharing the concerns raised by Dijck, the article introduces a new perspective—

TSCR—into the conversation. The aim is to offer a novel outlook on the nature of philia that transcends homophily and reveals instead the positive moral impact that digital philia can have on the individual.

The findings of this research suggest that digital technologies allow for enhancing the individual's moral character by shifting how one looks at communication—from emphasizing the individual's right to a voice to nurturing a structured culture of voices, and from preserving speech rights to ensuring their rightful service. This perspective can offer valuable insights for policymakers, guiding them in establishing effective processes aimed at mitigating homophily and assisting individuals and organizations in achieving more impactful communication and deliberation. Moral enhancement arises from the individual's need to engage with a greater number of significant others—individuals with the potential to influence their moral conduct.

In this encounter, the individual is compelled to cope with moral questions, regardless of their willingness to confront them. This, in turn, alters the ethical character of the individual in two significant ways. First, the individual experiences contingency by recognizing that things can always be different. The digital ecosystems pose a challenge for the individual, who must now navigate the difficulty of managing an unlimited number of significant others. Second, the individual contributes to the creation of new meanings that illustrate that things can indeed be a certain way. This outcome stems from the organization of significant others by new secondary institutions. This new order can be explained using the concept of the "generalized other" originally proposed by Mead (2015).

This article is structured into four sections. The Section "Homophily as Social Knowledge" provides a brief exploration of how homophily can be understood as social knowledge. It argues that given that TSCR is intersubjective in nature, it is well-suited to examining homophily. In the Section "Homophily Versus Pluralism and Contingency," TSCR is employed to scrutinize homophily, revealing a realm of significant novelty, such as the challenges individuals face when encountering significant others. The Section "Selfless Communication Through The Generalized Other" then applies the theory in arguing that homophily can be mitigated by organizing significant others to form a generalized other, which, in turn, will reinstall moral awareness in the individual. In conclusion, the Section "Conclusion" reflects on the new forms of philia emerging in digital spaces. While these may trigger a moral development process, they also raise new concerns regarding whether the ethics

of the individual evolve toward a type of *philia* more humanly disaffected.

Homophily as Social Knowledge

Traditionally, homophily has centered on the subject as its primary focus. While some authors acknowledge the relevance of the context in which individuals operate and the “need to be understood in their interrelations” (Verbeek, 2015, p. 218), the prevailing emphasis continues to be on the individual’s decision to engage in relationships. However, as individuals navigate digital spaces that exponentially increase social connections, little attention is given to whether the context of these multirelationships shapes their thought processes. Specifically, it remains unexplored whether an individual’s internal dialogue is influenced by ongoing interactions with multiple parties, potentially transforming personal reflection into a dialogue with those others. In light of this consideration, it becomes essential to shift the focus to *philia* itself—the relational aspect—and momentarily set aside the subjectivity or intentionality of the connected individuals. This approach recognizes that the condition of *Homo socius*—the ability to relate—precedes the condition of *Homo sapiens*—the ability to acquire knowledge. According to Schütz (1995, p. 280), “being conscious demands living in a structure of meaning only reachable through intersubjectivity: by way of interpreting the experiences of oneself and the experiences of the others.” This underscores the importance of intersubjectivity in shaping individual consciousness.

Schütz’s concept of one’s relationship with others aiding the gaining of awareness of reality inspired his disciples Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann to develop a theory explaining how individuals, through social processes, acquire conscience and construct reality.⁴ In TSCR, the authors explain how consciousness is acquired. They outline three key processes here: externalization, in which individuals express themselves through actions or expressions that become routine with repetition; objectivation, where these routines are categorized, institutionalized, and legitimized; and internalization, wherein individuals assign meaning to the objectified reality. Berger and Luckmann (2008, p. 163) describe internalization as “the immediate apprehension or interpretation of an objective event,” wherein it expresses meaning—serving as a manifestation of another’s subjective processes, which subsequently

4 Berger and Luckmann define “reality” as a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition (we cannot “wish them away”).

become personally meaningful. It is through this internalization that the individual develops a new ethical attitude, therewith facilitating effective communication.

This article applies TSCR theory to the case of homophily, demonstrating how digital technologies provide individuals with numerous opportunities to gain conscience through heterogeneous relationships with others. As individuals navigate social networks like Facebook, Instagram, or X, they encounter manifestations of other individuals’ subjective processes that they find meaningful. For instance, individuals who click “like” or decide “to heart” a post, for any reason, are engaging with content that resonates with them on some level. Internalization, as defined by Berger and Luckmann, occurs when the individual identifies with significant others⁵—or “those persons that deal with him intimately and whose attitudes are decisive for the formation of his conception of himself” (Berger, 2004, p. 99). Through the *philia* with other significant others and the perception of how they respond to one own’s behavior, the individual engages in a meaning-making process that enhances their knowledge and allows them to better understand how to act in a determined context. In these moments, the individual develops their moral compass. Examining homophily through the lens of TSCR theory reveals, then, a significant novelty: the individual’s imperative need to find ways to relate to a greater number of significant others.

Homophily vs Pluralism and Contingency

The surge in relationships afforded by digital technologies poses a notable challenge: the complexity of navigating a multitude of interactions. In 2016, Berger and Luckmann highlighted the impact of modernity in social dynamics, noting that it had given rise to pluralism. They emphasized how the situation is such that “[It] is not that there is no god

5 The term *significant other* is used for the first time by H. S. Sullivan in *Conceptions of Modern Psychiatry* to define “those people that can be held responsible for the internalization of norms [in an individual]” (Washington, D.C.: W.H. White Psychiatric Foundation, 1947, pp. 18–22). The use of the term significant other in the conceptualization of G.H. Mead—in his *Mind, Self and Society*—is faithful to the translation of “significant symbol,” in which symbol for the author “is nothing else than the stimulus whose response is granted in advance” (Chicago: UCP, 2015, p. 181). This paper uses, then, the term significant following the sense of significant symbol used by Mead. It intends, therefore, to distance itself from an acceptance strictly linguistic or semiotic, since the concept significant contains—according to Mead—a socializing power over the individual.

or that god is dead, [...] instead there are *too many* gods. And it must be managed somehow. Politically and also the individual has to make certain decisions here” (Steets, 2016, p. 21). This notion of pluralism—defined as “a situation in which there is competition in the institutional ordering of comprehensive meanings for everyday life” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 73)—disrupts the traditional family’s role in the socialization of the individual, as it is now shared with numerous digital agents. Moreover, understanding the concept of pluralism is essential in assessing homophily in social networks. These platforms grant access to a diverse array of meanings, reflecting the pluralistic nature of contemporary society. Therefore, exploring homophily necessitates recognition of the multifaceted nature of digital interactions, influenced by the competing and diverse meanings present in the digital space.

The pluralism inherent in the digital space allows individuals to engage with a multitude of diverse perspectives—significant others. In their communications, these different perspectives compete to provide meaning to the individual across various aspects of their daily life. This abundance of choices compels the individual to confront ways of thinking that may be substantially different from their own. Such a realization often occurs when individuals encounter online opinions or comments following news articles or engage in information threads on social networks and digital media platforms. Whether is reading the online comments on sport news, discussing with the members of a Facebook group for fishing calamari, or listening to a community of experts in Apple products, the individual confronts the contingency of the unknown.

Analyzing these comments can lead to the insight that reality can be perceived and lived differently from what one had previously considered the only way possible. Or put it simply, as Pfadenhauer (2016, p. 155) observes, “things can be really, really different.” In this inherently ethical encounter with diverse perspectives, the individual comes to recognize the inevitable pluralism of values within the human condition. This realization becomes possible when individuals maintain an open and attentive mind, receptive to differences. As Düringer (2021, p. 928) suggests, this receptiveness involves being “really looking [and attempting] to view the object from perspectives other than my own.” Despite being initially challenging, this article argues that this openness may become second nature for individuals as they assimilate the power of social networks and “develop codes of use for dealing with [them]” (Verbeek, 2015, p. 225), as elaborated on in the next section.

Dealing with a greater number of diverse views, each acting as significant, can be daunting for individuals, leading many analyses of homophily to overlook the potential benefits here, too. However, Brundidge (2010, p. 684) notes that the Internet may *inadvertently* expose individuals to political differences, suggesting that such exposure can prompt them to activate their reasoning faculties. This assertion underscores the importance of grappling with difference in the digital age. Undeniably, the process of pluralization confronts individuals with a plethora of alternatives for roles, identities, interpretation schemes, values, and worldviews. As Pfadenhauer (2016, p. 154) aptly observes, “these alternatives force us to reflect.” Individuals gain access to an immense landscape of opinions herewith, confirming Berger and Luckmann’s (2008, p. 168) assertion that “there is always more objective reality ‘available’ than is actually internalized in any individual consciousness.” This suggests that encountering difference in the digital space opens up new avenues for individuals to expand their understanding of the world.

Despite the potential benefits of exposure to difference, however, most studies on homophily tend to focus on the difficulty of the task, adopting a critical stance and questioning whether this encounter with contingency holds any ultimate value for the individual. This might explain why many such studies tend to concentrate on highlighting the gregarious patterns observed in individual’s personal networks. For instance, McPherson et al. (2001, p.415) note that in certain cases, “people’s personal networks are homogeneous with regard to many sociodemographic, behavioral and intrapersonal characteristics.” Similarly Roszkowska and Melé (2021, p. 193) observe that “individuals tend to adapt to the expectations of others” within their social circle, while Esteve-Del-Valle (2022, p. 2) suggests that they may be “less likely to see opposing views as legitimate.” While these observations offer valuable insights into social dynamics, they also highlight a lack of autonomy and critical thinking among individuals.

However, rather than viewing these patterns as static descriptions of social behavior, they can be enriched and transformed by valuing the encounter with diverse perspectives (significant others) as a means of shaping the moral character of the individual toward becoming a more open communicator. As Borgmann (2013) suggests, an individual facing a diverse array of significant others must become the fusion and harmony of the multiple voices now addressing them. This entails being “less ordained, more searching, but also more responsible; less focused,

more complicated, but also more intricate; less solid, more vulnerable” (Borgmann, 2013, p. 20), ultimately leading to a more open-minded approach to social interaction. The crystallization of an individual’s character will depend on how they deal with such pluralism, whether through individual ethics—taking an *intrasubjective* approach—or alternatively via *intersubjective* means of deliberation.

In the first case, individuals adapt their ethics to manage the confusion resulting from the plurality of voices encountered in digital spaces. This adaptation often manifests when individuals choose to disengage from social networking groups or adopt a reifying attitude toward *others*, such as clicking randomly on the “like” button or simply not responding to comments—a practice known as *ghosting*. Marin suggests that in this scenario, the individual may develop an attitude of *moral desensitization*, as they become increasingly disconnected from the ethical dimensions of their online interactions. In societies where pluralism fully imposes itself, Pfadenhauer (2016, p. 149) notes that “value systems and stocks of meaning are no longer the common property of all members of society.” This results in an individual who may struggle to navigate the complexity of digital spaces, who no longer knows “about the world, how to behave in it, what is reasonable to expect, and, last but not least, who he is” (Pfadenhauer, 2016, p. 149). At this stage, the individual may develop suspended *judgment*, lacking a clear moral compass.

In contrast, in the second scenario, the individual cultivates a collective ethics in response to the encountered pluralism. Rather than viewing homophily as merely an individual right to expression here, it should be conceptualized instead as a landscape of voices resonating with moral significance. Homophily becomes, then, not just a starting point but a culmination, a phenomenon requiring evaluation and assessment of reception. A voice without assessment lacks the ethical dimension and hinders the progress of the political system. This perspective emphasizes that emerging organizations or institutions have the capacity to organize these *significant* voices and revive the individual’s own moral self-questioning. In such instances, new “semantic territories are created,” fostering the moral development of individuals and facilitating effective communication.

Selfless Communication Through the Generalized Other

Effective communication arises from the convergence of individuals. The individual internalizes *the message*

when there is a concordance of significant in her intersubjective world. This occurs when the individual identifies not only with specific significant roles and attitudes—for instance, when mum and dad react by being upset when the soup is spilled—but also with the generalization that “everyone opposes soup-spilling.” At this moment, “the norm is generalized to ‘One does not spill soup.’ [...] This abstraction from the roles and attitudes of concrete significant others is called the generalized other” (Berger & Luckmann, 2008, p. 167). The concept of generalized other is valuable in our examined context as it acknowledges how digital technologies allow significant to aggregate in communities of meaning that oppose homophily.

Our thinking is an inner conversation in which we may be taking the roles of specific acquaintances over against ourselves, but usually it is with what I have termed the “generalized other” that we converse and so attain to the levels of abstract thinking and that impersonality, the so-called objectivity that we cherish (Mead, 1925, p. 272).

This community of meanings represents the *semantic territories* Tarleton Gillespie refers to in his analysis of algorithms. These territories emerge as responses to “incongruence and distortion” (Griselda Lopez, 2021, p. 184) or “inadvertent exposure” (Brundidge, 2010, p. 686) to overcome the blackmailing of autonomy. This unexpectedness aligns with the unintended consequences here that have been identified by other philosophers of information (Floridi, 2016, p. 2).

The Time’s Up movement exemplifies how an aggregation of significant can create objective meaning. Through the hashtag #MeToo, diverse individuals express their intolerance to abusive behavior and sexual harassment. User interactions are utilized “to overcome systematic misunderstanding through shared meaning-making” (Marin, 2022, p. 425). Digital technologies pave the way for the voices of *significant* individuals to form a symbolic universe—a generalized other—that questions certain social practices while compelling the individual to reflect on their own ethics. The moral impact of these aggregations forces rapid decision-making, condemning all those allegedly behaving immorally. Taking the form of a generalized other, the Time’s Up movement compels the individual to become aware of morally relevant subject matters. This occurs independently of homophily, constituting a moral development in which new institutions provide individuals with ethical meaning while society is moralized.

Effective communication is achieved when new institutions acquire legitimate power to influence community conduct, both directly and indirectly. Mead highlights that actions or statements gain social universality when they are understood, accepted, or deemed true by others involved in a common activity, equating this universality with objectivity.

In so far as what the individual does or says is understandable by, accepted by, or true for any other individuals implicated in a common activity, [...] then what is done or said has a new type of universality—social universality. Such universality is in one sense of the term a synonym for objectivity (Mead, 2015, p. Intro, XXXVI)

This structural socialization of knowledge encourages the transcending of individual perspectives, as the generalized other transforms its distinctiveness into an objective value. A recent successful example of this “creation” of a generalized other is the *Community Notes* initiative by X. By empowering people to add context to potentially misleading posts, the aggregation of notes may contribute to establishing a collectively objective truth. As Van Dijck and Poell suggest, “[these] flashes of collectivity are produced through the mutual articulation of activist social media-sharing practices and the techno commercial architecture of social platforms” (2016, p. 228). The generalized other, according to the authors, arises not from the structure of movements like #MeToo but from the affordances of the specific architecture of the platform in question. This geometrical space allows for achieving unity in diversity to reach the *common sense* praised by Schütz such as the one reached in an intersubjective way.

In this process, the individual moralizes themselves through an intersubjective ethics that is indifferent to introspectiveness, religion, or metaphysics. This “moral attunement as a transindividual form of situated knowing, socially constituted and often socially enacted” (Di Paolo and De Jaegher, 2022, p. 253) is achieved through the aggregation of voices—the generalized other. In this process, the individual externalizes their subjectivity, for example, by handing over personal data or granting access to their private sphere, without significant objection, as the generalized other imposes the primacy of collective over individual thinking. This represents a turn toward the outside, in search of a decision made through the concept of practical intersubjectivity.

The concept of “intersubjectivity” designates a structure of communicative relations between subjects [...]. The political correlate of this concept is a social order in which the atomization of individuals

is eliminated, not through the subordination to a collectivity but instead through the participation of all in reasoning discussion to determine their common future (Joas, 1997, p. 13).

This new way of reasoning allows incongruences to emerge, as a plurality of moral beliefs no longer poses a problem. The generalized other establishes criteria to settle the dispute, facilitating communication by an aggregation of voices. An illustration of this is the recent management decisions taken by Elon Musk, who placed his position as CEO of X at stake contingent on the outcome of a survey poll involving all platform participants. These *ubuntu*⁶ actions exemplify novel methods of organizational management, embracing a heterogenous consensus formed by the aggregation of voices—or the manifestation of the generalized other. This shift reflects an evolution toward a more inclusive and participatory approach, reflecting that the “ongoing becoming in communities is constitutive of human personhood” (Di Paolo & De Jaegher, 2022, p. 244).

The moral implications stemming from digital relationships are further underscored by Floridi, who acknowledges “the strength of the logical coherence, the inescapable, constraining grip of dynamic structures, which have features and interact in ways that are utterly independent of our wills and desires” (2019, p. Prefacio, XIV). His concept of *distributed moral actions* explains how “in distributed environments, it is increasingly common that a network of agents [...] may cause morally good or evil actions through local interactions that are not, in themselves, morally loaded but neutral” (Floridi, 2016, p. 2). For instance, Time’s Up participants may express opinions that lack explicit moral content but still collectively contribute to the establishment of a moral order when those opinions together form a generalized other. This process prompts individuals to reevaluate their ethical stances and engage with morally relevant issues.

The phenomenon of moral attunement and effective communication resulting from the organization of significant others as a generalized other extends beyond the Time’s Up movement, of course. The digital realm offers numerous examples of where the participation of diverse significant others consolidates new realities, independent of individual moral perspectives or intentions. This is evident in various movements such as Fridays for Future and Black

6 According to the African Journal of Social Work, Ubuntu is a collection of values and practices of African origin that point to how the individual human being is innately part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental, and spiritual world.

Lives Matter, as well as virtual services like Tripadvisor and Booking.com. Moreover, advancements in natural language processing, exemplified by big data models like ChatGPT, further enable the aggregation of significants and the formation of collective symbols. These digital interactions, whether occurring separately or as part of a generalized other, compel individuals to reassess their ethical attitudes and engage more deeply with moral dilemmas.

The aforementioned examples signify a revitalization of ethics that challenges traditional critical analyses of the digital world. Thus, Albert Carr's⁷ argument—in his cognitive impact studies—regarding the existence of a trade-off between depth and breadth (or reflection and stimulation) in virtual interactions is not supported here by the notion that the scope of significants can actually become profoundly meaningful when new social organizations aggregate concrete significants into a generalized other. When Daniela Griselda, with her Schützian phenomenological approach, explores social distance and states “that familiarity and strangeness between social groups, is experienced in the social world in terms of *We* and *They*” (2021, p. 191), the author similarly seems to overlook the inclusive concept of “*us*” within digital social networks. To complement Griselda's views, it is argued that digital platforms facilitate the formation of a generalized other that encompasses “*We*,” “*Us*,” and “*They*”—emphasizing therewith the importance of aggregating all significants, rather than prioritizing individual values.

One key concern here, however, is the potential consequences of moral development and effective communication in digital spaces, particularly the risk of moral desensitization. The habit of engaging with numerous significants may lead to a diminished ethical involvement due to the attention demands posed by these interactions, making it challenging to maintain traditional ethical involvement. This raises questions about how to manage significants effectively in digital environments.

Acknowledging Verbeek's proposal of an ethics of things that considers the increasing intelligence of objects in our lifeworld, it becomes apparent that simply subjectivizing informational entities does not resolve the challenge of managing significants. Instead, there is a need to objectivize the *relationship* or *in-betweenness* of these entities. Establishing an ethics rooted in contingency, which includes

relationships with and in-between things, could enhance the ethical attitude of individuals in digital environments.

This envisioned ethics prompts more frequent reflections on what constitutes good or evil for a life worth living. It embraces a perspective whereby moral reasoning appears to emerge independently from the individual, and (moral) “intelligence is decouple from agency” (Floridi, 2023).

Conclusion

Homophily can be mitigated if individuals recognize the moral relevance of perspectives other than their own. Without such awareness, or *moral uptake*, effective communication is impossible. This article concludes that the digital space imposes on the individual a greater uptake of unexpected diverse views, enhancing communication potential. This effective communication unfolds in two stages: First, society adopts novel moral behaviors due to the surge of new communicational attitudes, and second, individuals shift from introspective (intrasubjective) to collaborative (intersubjective) moral reasoning. This approach challenges Griselda's assertion that “moral density cannot increase without physical density increasing” (2021, p. 175). Finally, these conclusions also challenge two common assumptions in the homophily literature: refuting the notions of a lack of communication autonomy and the confinement of the modern individual to an echo chamber. The emergence of a new moral order through the aggregation of significants also questions the validity of Alasdair MacIntyre's diagnosis on contemporary moral discourse that “there seem to be no rational way in which moral disputes could be resolved” (Voorhoeve, 2011, p. 111).

The present study thus aligns with prior research, emphasizing that “is more difficult for users to exercise moral sensitivity in an online environment” (Marin, 2022, p. 425). It has also explored online social environments as sites of transformations that hold “potentialities of becoming” (Di Paolo & De Jaegher, 2021) and underscores that “‘the invisible excess of sense’ in group relationships emerges as a consequence of the transcendence and strangeness of the other” (Griselda Lopez, 2021, p. 195). A distinctive feature hereof is the incorporation of a new theoretical framework—the sociology of knowledge—in contrast to Marin's and Di Paolo's enactivism-inspired ethics and Verbeek's ethics of things. While Marin aims at “enhancing the users awareness of the moral loud of their interactions” (Marin, 2022, p. 425), this study has done so instead by drawing

⁷ The general concern regarding the impact of the virtual space on cognition becomes prominent with the famous negative critical review by Carr in his informative article “Is Google making us stupid? What the Internet is doing to our brains,” *The Atlantic*, August (2008).

on the concept of the *significant other*. Additionally, while Di Paolo explores raising consciousness through the concept of moral attunement, this study turned instead to the role of the generalized other. However, the main point of departure with Verbeek lies in his proposal of an ethics of things that not only disregards the problem created by a multitude of significant others but instead actually exacerbates it since all entities are included as moral subjects. This article has suggested, rather, that the moral conditions of online social environments may necessitate the development of a new disaffected ethics.

The evolving moral context, characterized by a multitude of significant others, compels individuals to recognize their inability to manage disorder individually. In response, they experiment with forms of relational behavior that succeed when they embrace the contingency of this digital space. Accepting that moral deliberation can take diverse forms, those who embrace moral pluralism gain access to novel ways of thinking. These individuals build their ethics—and, as such, also their identity—through the alignment with group attitudes. However, managing the increasing demands of relationships remains a challenge and raises the question of whether individuals might be compelled to develop a disaffected ethics—one that disregards both subjectivism and objectivism, focusing solely on the relationship (in-betweenness). Future research should explore, then, what types of heterogeneous ethics can effectively manage the pluralism of significant others in the digital space. The relational requirements here call for new forms of interaction seemingly requiring the paying of attention to not paying attention, potentially prompting individuals to reassess their current understanding of intelligence and reality.

The results of the present research have their limitations. First, the paradigm shift brought about by the need to relate to a multitude of significant others primarily affects those individuals with life experiences predating digital technologies. It is reasonable to assume that younger generations growing up in a multirelational context may adapt more seamlessly to the new paradigm. Nevertheless, their socialization processes will also be challenged due to the increasing number of significant others. Second, this research is confined in scope to the technological phase of Web 2.0—social web. Additionally, the study lacks an in-depth exploration of the dark web. It is possible that the findings of the present study will have to be revised vis-à-vis those larger social environments. Finally, while the aim was never to provide technical guidance on designing a digital infrastructure in a more desirable way, the findings

hopefully still provide insight on the impact of the significant others in the shaping of the individual's character. Further research into the direction of how to design digital networks that allow for a digital ethical denominator is desirable.

Having regained individual access to effective moral communication underscores the urgency of developing the necessary ethics for responsible action. This is imperative to consolidate moral progress. To this end, it is essential to channel future efforts and passions toward the cultivation and refinement of ethical frameworks conducive to responsible engagement and interaction in the continually evolving digital landscape.

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