Informatics and Media, Uppsala University, invites you to a lecture and seminar:

**Digital Media Ethics: All that is solid melts into air?**

*Charles Ess*, Professor MSO,
Information and Media Studies Department,
Aarhus University

**When:** 3 May 2011, 16.30–18.00
**Where:** Lecture Hall 2, Ekonomikum, Kyrkogårds gatan 10, Uppsala University
**Chair:** Professor Christian Fuchs

**Abstract**

The past two decades have witnessed the rapid and global diffusion of digitally-based devices, technologies, and services, ranging from the multiple variants of computer-mediated communication (CMC), now known primarily in the form of the Web and the Internet, to smartphones, cameras, and other devices designed to work more or less seamlessly with contemporary communication technologies. As a result, our ethical landscapes have likewise dramatically changed, where such landscapes include as a first level the sorts of ethical issues and challenges we face: this is to say, while many issues are familiar from earlier times and communication technologies, the new landscapes include often distinctively novel challenges in the domains of privacy, copyright, violence in games, easy access to pornography, etc. But these landscapes incorporate still more fundamentally the ethical frameworks that may be enlisted to resolving specific ethical challenges (e.g., whether consequentialism, deontology, virtue ethics, and/or other frameworks – level 2). These landscapes further include the still more foundational – but thereby more subtle and more complex – assumptions at work regarding our sense of identity or selfhood, and what sorts of relationships, including relationships entailing ethical norms and obligations, such identity and selfhood may hold with Others (level 3). Finally, to state the obvious: especially these latter levels, at least on first glance, manifest great, if not irresoluble, differences and diversity as digital media put us in touch with more or less the entire range of global cultures. The uncomfortable result is that digital media ethics confronts us with often distinctively novel challenges – not only on the first level of specific ethical issues (e.g., privacy, copyright, etc.), but at the more foundational levels of ethical frameworks and the most difficult questions of human identity. Especially in the global context facilitated by new communication technologies – in all three levels, we are confronted with events and challenges that throw much, if not all, of our earlier assumptions and approaches up in the air.
As I will argue in my presentation, the good news is that we can point to emerging agreements cross-culturally regarding central ethical challenges posed by digital media, beginning with contemporary debates concerning privacy (level 1). This is in part because of a growing turn to virtue ethics – an ethics that is distinctive for both its global scope (i.e., it is more or less universally shared across cultures) and its pluralistic structure – i.e., one that holds shared norms together with diverse interpretations or applications of those norms that thereby preserve local cultural values and practices (level 2).

These considerations, however, lead us into the more foundational matter of how our ethical responses depend upon two distinct sets of assumptions regarding selfhood and identity (level 3). The first of these, an atomistic or individual self, is both characteristic of modern ethics (consequentialism and deontology) and modern politics (specifically, the liberal-democratic state), and appears to be closely correlated with the communication technologies of literacy and print (so Foucault’s “technologies of the self”). The second, a relational or “smeared-out” self, correlates more closely with what Walter Ong identified as orality and the secondary orality of electric media. Especially given the correlation between oral cultures and hierarchical/authoritarian regimes, I will argue by way of conclusion that our most important ethical – indeed, political – choice with regard to digital media is how far we will use these media in ways that preserve individual selfhood as requisite for liberal-democratic regimes, and how far we may “amuse ourselves to [political] death” (so Neil Postman, 1984) by allowing new media usages to eclipse literacy, print, and the sense of self they foster.

Biography

Charles Ess is Professor of Philosophy and Religion, Drury University, Springfield, Missouri, USA. He is currently Professor MSO [med særlige opgaver – with special duties], Department of Information and Media Studies, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark (2009-2012). He has held guest professor positions in the Department of Digital Aesthetics and Communication (DiAC), IT-University, Copenhagen (2003), the Programme for Applied Ethics, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway (2005-2008), and the Centre Universitaire Vauban, Nîmes, France (2007). In Fall, 2004, he served as a Fulbright Senior Scholar at the University of Trier, where, with colleagues in Chinese studies and media studies, he continued a cross-cultural comparison between Western and Eastern online communication styles, and attitudes towards privacy and data privacy policies.

With Fay Sudweeks, Dr. Ess co-founded and co-organizes the now biennial international conference series, “Cultural Attitudes towards Technology and Communication” (CATaC), hosted most recently by the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada (see <www.catacconference.org>). His work on culture, technology, and communication has led to a specific focus on the contrasts between Western-designed computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies, including those underlying the Web and the Internet, and the cultural values and communicative preferences of global cultures, including those of indigenous peoples and “Eastern” societies. This work, combined with his work in information ethics and research ethics, constitutes a larger
project of developing a global but pluralistic framework for both research ethics and information ethics.

Dr. Ess has received awards for excellence in teaching and scholarship, and national recognition for his work in hypermedia. Recent publications include: (with Soraj Hongladarom, co-editor), *Information Technology Ethics: Cultural Perspectives* (IGI Global, 2007); (with Mia Consalvo, co-editor), *The Blackwell Handbook of Internet Studies* (2010), and (with May Thorseth [NTNU], Johnny Søraker [University of Twente, Netherlands], co-editors), special issue of *Etikk i Praksis (Nordic Journal of Applied Ethics)* on ethical and social aspects of mobile/ubiquitous computing (Nr. 2, 2010). His book, *Digital Media Ethics* (Polity Press, 2009), has been widely adopted in the U.S. and abroad as a textbook in communication and media studies, as well as in philosophy courses. His next volume (with May Thorseth, co-editor), *Trust and Virtual Worlds: Contemporary Perspectives* (Peter Lang) will appear in 2011.

**Contact**

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**Further information**

The lecture/seminar is part of the two day conference on Media and Communication research and education in Uppsala, 3-4 May 2011, which is arranged by FSMK and the Department of Informatics and Media, Uppsala University. For full program see: [www.im.uu.se](http://www.im.uu.se)