

Unit Two Essay Assignment (E2)

Write an essay, about four to six pages long, using a case study to address the question of the relationship between ethics and the Internet.

Studying the cases available on the course website, choose an issue of ethics relevant to the Internet (file sharing, privacy, spam, etc.) Your essay should use this case to offer insight into the relationship between ethics and the Internet: What is the role of the Internet in shaping this case, and how does the Internet affect ethical concerns broadly speaking? As such, your job is not to resolve the debate about your case study nor to pick a side; rather, you are expected to comment on whether and how the Internet imposes unique circumstances on the question of ethics. How does this ethical issue arise in the context of electronic communication? What traditional ethical questions bear on this issue? Do we need to understand ethics differently in the context of the Internet?

Challenges: As in Unit One, this essay poses a challenge in that you must negotiate an awkward tension between *the particular and the general*: On the one hand, your essay will analyze a particular case of ethics, drawing on specific real-world examples; on the other hand, your conclusions should address broader questions of ethics and the Internet, using your chosen case as an example from which to generalize. In Unit One, this particular/general problem showed up as a problem of *motive*: how to justify the analysis of those two specific images. In Unit Two, motive is sort of built in to the assignment, since you are writing about the inherently important issue of ethics. The challenge this time is likely a matter of *thesis*: what claim can you make that is broadly related to ethics and the Internet while still being analyzable in terms of a specific case? Also, in Unit One, the *evidence* you could draw upon was fairly limited to the images under analysis. In Unit Two, the evidence is far more disparate in scope and in type, and choosing just what evidence to cite will be an additional challenge.

This essay is asking you to consider the nature of ethics. Ethics is not just a matter of your intuition about right and wrong, but involves systematic thinking about the *basis* for making judgments of value. As such, you should support your ethical discussion with some attention to the assumptions that you are making about what constitutes ethical conduct. What sort of overarching ethical framework are you employing, and why should your reader sympathize with this framework for ethics? It is more important to consider all reasonable perspectives than it is to “prove” your central claim. The strength of your essay lies in the thoughtfulness and interest of the analysis that you offer, not in the force with which you defend your thesis. Therefore, include an analysis of legitimate perspectives even if they do not support the conclusion you wish to draw.

Audience: Assume that your reader is a generally educated and thoughtful person, who is broadly familiar with the Internet and the associated issues, though probably not familiar with the particular case you use to frame your essay. Offer the salient details of the case, but make sure that your language is as concise as possible, including only those details necessary to make yourself understood and to make your point forcefully. Your job is not primarily to explain current events or recount the details of a case, but to offer critical

analysis of that case in order to reveal its far-reaching implications.

Process: It will likely be helpful for you to begin by investigating your own intuition about the ethics of the case you choose to study, but you cannot stop with this intuition. Instead, you must use this intuition as an opportunity to explore the broader question of how the Internet has affected questions of ethics. Again, the primary challenge of this essay is to negotiate the perplexing demand that you use the concrete case study as a launching pad to move toward broader conclusions. It is not enough—and possibly not even relevant—to take a side in the debate, even if you defend your opinions with persuasive reasoning.

Research: This essay does not call for significant additional research, but does invite you to make use of a variety of sources, including both scholarly and journalistic ones. As with every essay you submit at MIT, please include bibliographic information for any sources you use, and please include this information in a proper format. See *Writing with Sources* for formatting information.

Along with both draft and revision, please append a page with one or two paragraphs of self-critique, where you discuss what you think are the problems with your essay. What parts of your essay are unclear? What parts are boring? What parts are not sufficiently motivated? What should you have discussed that got left out? You may also comment on aspects of your essay that you are particularly pleased with or proud of. This sort of self-critique is an extremely valuable skill in essay writing, and it is well worth practicing whenever possible.

The draft of this essay is due by email at noon on Wednesday, October 12. In addition to sending me a copy, you will send a copy of your draft to two of your peers, for peer editing on Thursday, October 13 in class. (Further instructions to follow.) The revision is due in class on Thursday, October 20. As part of your responsibility in this assignment is peer editing, late draft submissions will count as absences from class. Late revisions may be penalized.

For the details of formatting and typography, please refer to the syllabus for this course.