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A Double-Edged Sword in the Digital Age

Memes are a common form of humor, social commentary, and expression in today's internet culture. Although many people consider memes to be harmless amusement, they frequently entail the unauthorized exploitation of actual people's photos. This presents serious ethical issues, especially when meme targets are mocked or suffer psychologically. Ghyslain Raza, popularly referred to as the "Star Wars Kid", is among the most well-known examples. Raza was severely depressed and spent time in a mental hospital as a result of the constant bullying and humiliation he received when a video of him mimicking lightsaber motions went viral. The moral consequences of creating and spreading memes are seriously called into question by this unfortunate incident.

The effects of memes vary greatly, despite the fact that some people have profited from their unanticipated online celebrity. According to reports, Kyle Craven, who gained popularity from the "Bad Luck Brian" meme, made between \$15,000 and \$20,000 from merchandise. The "Overly Attached Girlfriend", Lana Morris, also utilized her popularity as a meme to establish her YouTube career. However, these benefits do not make up for the harms that Raza and other people have endured. Memes' morality and legality are the main ethical questions, particularly when they have an impact on someone's reputation or general well-being.

Ethical guidelines such as the IEEE Code of Ethics and the ACM Code of Ethics clarify this conundrum. The ACM Code advises computing professionals to "respect the

privacy of others” (1.6) and places a strong emphasis on “avoid harm” (1.2) (Association for Computing Machinery). These rules are broken by meme creators who post someone else’s image without that person’s permission, particularly when the purpose or outcome is mocking. Members are also urged by the IEEE Code of Ethics to “avoid injuring others, their property, reputation, or employment by false or malicious action” and to “treat all persons fairly and with respect” (IEEE Code, #1). These ethical obligations are frequently disregarded by memes that are made without context or to degrade others.

Biblical teachings emphasize the moral significance of our acts, particularly when they concern other people, in addition to professional ethics. “He who mocks the poor taunts his Maker; He who rejoices at calamity will not go unpunished”, says Proverbs 17:5. Similarly, Luke 6:31 states, “Do to others as you would have them do to you”. These verses support the notion that it is disrespectful and insensitive to use someone else’s picture for amusement or viral success without considering the impact on the person. Memes can have a long-lasting effect, despite the fact that they are frequently spread carelessly.

People who unintentionally become memes currently have limited legal safeguards. The use of someone else’s image in a meme is not prohibited by any particular law. Nonetheless, rules regarding copyright, defamation, and the right to publicity are important. For instance, even in situations when it is not legally needed, musicians such as “Weird Al” Yankovic usually obtain consent before parodying another artist’s work. Should those who create memes be held to the same standards? Many would say definitely. People should, at the very least, be able to ask for the removal of memes that use their image without their permission, particularly if the message is harmful or objectionable.

Some may contend that asking permission for each meme would inhibit humor and innovation. Although this is a legitimate worry, moral innovations should not compromise the dignity of others. Perhaps meme culture needs unofficial ethical norms or community-based

principles, similar to how society has established standards for ethical journalism or scholarly study. Creators might, for instance, refrain from using recognizable people without consent or offer a mechanism for someone to ask that the meme be removed. When someone's picture is used for financial gain, it could be appropriate to give them credit or recompense.

Ultimately, the conflict between respect for others and freedom of expression is reflected in meme culture. Although memes can be amusing, clever, and even powerful, they can also be exploitative, damaging, and degrading. It is our duty as aspiring computer scientists, developers, and online citizens to make positive use of our influence. "Everything is permissible- but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible - but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others", according to 1 Corinthians 10:23-24. Therefore, the ethics of memes should take into account not just what is lawful but also what is fair, compassionate, and advantageous to the individuals who created the images.

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