Manifesto for digital ethics

Human beings and society faced with the digital challenge

The world is undergoing a profound digital conversion. The word "digital" entered our daily vocabulary at the turn of the 21st century. Its scientific and technical scope includes computer science, part of mathematics, physics and cognitive sciences, together with robotics and artificial intelligence. The digital world is modifying scientific methods and technical approaches. It is also contributing to the global social and cultural environment in which we live, and data are an essential part: they are exchanged, stored and algorithmically processed by machines in volumes and at speeds that we humans cannot match.

The digital world brings its share of challenges and opportunities, hopes and fears. It disrupts relationships with other people through a phenomenon of virtualization and amplification of exchanges, but also of increasingly systematic quantification and evaluation. We feel the digitization of our lives without perceiving all its consequences; its invisibility and pervasive nature amplify its transformative ability.

This digital world is actually modifying and enduringly questioning individual and collective relationships to knowledge, memory, space, property, health, work, and the environment. It questions the notion of privacy through the exposure of private life on a scale never before seen in human history.

It is crucial to foresee these developments and to consider:
- this redefinition of relationships with ourselves and others in all spheres of social relations: family, friends, work, and institutions;
- ways of respecting people's autonomy while attempting to bridge the digital divide;
- the ability to remain sovereign in our democratic choices;
- the conditions under which we can exercise our free will in a relationship between human beings and machines;
- the social, economic, and environmental sustainability of digital developments.

The digital transformation of society challenges us to reconsider humanism in the light of the digital age.

The specific nature of digital ethics

Ethics is a continuous, evolving deliberation inspired by the history of thought and linked to a culture. It identifies and questions values and norms, highlighting their conflicts, in order to clarify individual or collective choices. Ethical considerations on science and technology may relate to particular moments of human existence, such as procreation or death, or to any moment in everyday life. This is the case of digital ethics, which constantly challenges our values in the light of new uses of technology, with a radically new, ubiquitous and universal dimension to their effects.

This ethical approach forces the academic and business worlds to formulate new research questions on digital developments as they unfold. It also obliges the whole of society to reconsider a corpus of values and norms that appear in a new light: for example, transparency, freedom of thought or the right to respect for one's private and family life, home, and correspondence.

The eminently political scope of digital ethics must be emphasized: digital technologies and the economic models that support them disrupt the various areas of sovereignty. Major digital tech companies compete with nation-states in many of their traditional prerogatives, and encroach on the democratic process.

These characteristics of the digital world lead us to emphasize the specificity of the ethical approach to it, taking into account:
- the significant and lasting influence of digital technology on people;
- the fascination caused by machines that imitate living beings;
- the radical and universal questioning of the way in which we now consider human autonomy, and both social and political relations;
- digital contributions to the objectives of sustainable development, particularly for education, culture, health, social justice, the economy, and the environment.

The practice of digital ethics needs to be conceived bearing in mind both its specificity and its universal scope to develop a critical thought process among citizens.

A permanent French national consultative committee for digital ethics
To shed light on individual and collective choices, a national digital ethics committee must engage society's stakeholders, formulate new questions, identify related values, and pinpoint potential conflict between them. An independent, consultative ethics committee must reconcile the need for a thorough, multidisciplinary analysis with the imperative of an educational approach accessible to as many people as possible.

A national digital ethics committee addresses citizens, with particular attention to the most vulnerable among them, but its deliberations are also essential to the people and institutions that create, develop, market, frame, regulate, and use digital technologies. Ethical reflections must be inclusive; they are everyone's responsibility.

The National Pilot Committee for Digital Ethics—CNPEN—was set up in late 2019 by the French Prime Minister on the recommendation of the report *"For a meaningful artificial intelligence"* by MP Cédric Villani. It comes under the auspices of the National Consultative Ethics Committee for health and life sciences, the CCNE. CNPEN members have drawn the following lessons from their experience:

- a national consultative committee for digital ethics should propose a frame of reference to develop a forward-looking view of the issues at stake;
- this committee should offer each individual, and thus the whole of society, the means with which to develop their discernment in response to the challenges of the digital world;
- its ethical deliberations should be multidisciplinary, accessible, and independent. The committee must also ensure that they are visible and useful;
- the deliberations should take into account our cultural specificities and contribute to the democratic debate on a national and European scale; they should also be placed in an international context in order to grasp the universal dimension of the digital world.

The permanent action of an independent, national consultative committee for digital ethics should provide a national reference framework to stimulate, coordinate and enlighten individual and collective deliberations on the ethical issues raised by the digital transformation.