



REVIEWS

Ethics in the Digital Domain

Reviewed by Michael Ray Smith

Robert S. Fortner (2026), *Ethics in the Digital Domain*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Bloomsbury Academic. ISBN-13: 979-8881803391. Hardcover: \$130.00; Paperback: \$39.95; Ebook: \$35.95, 352 pages. This book is also available on Amazon.

Each chapter ends with a list of sources, both digital and paper, to examine for further review. Here’s one on TikTok that is both telling and amusing. Good for further reading such as Villalobos, L. (2025, 01/14). “TikTok users are flocking to a Chinese-owned app, not back to Meta.” <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/columnist/2025/01/14/rednote-app-china-replace-tiktok-facebook-instagram/77675664007/>

The overarching ethical system found in “Digital Domain” is utilitarianism, but Fortner offers six questions that help in personal decision-making:

- Q.1: Does the difference between right and wrong matter in this case?
- Q.2: Are people being treated as agents (ends) in their own right?
- Q.3: Do those who are the worst-off gain anything from the decision?
- Q.4: Are people taking responsibility for others’ welfare?
- Q.5: Do those benefiting in number and degree outweigh those who are not?

Q.6: Is the decision made likely to lead to human flourishing? (Is a better society being imagined or enabled?) (p. 45).

*Digital Domain* can be political at times and questions elected leaders and their use of media. Fortner is fond of grilling media companies such as Meta’s Facebook, which he said earns more than \$1.5 billion on users’ data.

Overall, *Ethics in the Digital Domain* covers the topic while helping readers rethink the web that over-promised information that often informs and delights and but can hurt as well. Only discerning users who think about the ethics of their use of the digital domain will find continual benefit of this odd online world.

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AI companions. Tor. Doom scrolling. Facial recognition.

Prolific writer Robert S. Fortner tackles those topics and more in his latest look at the ethical landscape for the thought doctors of law, education, media and more in *Ethics in a Digital Domain*, 2nd edition, Bloomsbury Academic, 2026.

This time his journey is solo following many books with co-author P. Mark Fackler and their publications, including *World Media Ethics: Cases and Commentary*, *The Handbook of Global Communication and Media Ethics*, *Ethics & Evil in the Public Sphere: Media, Universal Values, & Global Development*, *Essays in Honor of Clifford G. Christians* and others.

In this latest sweep of ethics in the digital domain, Fortner asks penetrating questions about the casual and deliberate use of screens and zeros and ones.

Take Tor, for example. It bills itself as a network for anonymous communication. What are the tradeoffs with this kind of platform? Or doom scrolling, the compulsion to relentlessly read negative news.

Or the use of digital photographs. A suggestive photograph taken casually may be used deliberately to incriminate someone or flatter her. Does a standard exist to evaluate whether a photograph unduly helps or hurts?

How about AI generated companions? Fortner identifies several such as Kupid AI, DreamGF, Spi-

cyChat, Cutes AI, CrushOn, Anima AI, Nastia AI, and Romantic AI.

Fortner writes, “One such site is solcandy.ai that invites men to generate their own girl and offers a variety of characters from 18 to 55 years of age, some in anime and others apparently physically human, nearly all of whom have prominent breasts. If you had a good friend who had established a ‘relationship’ with such a virtual partner and shared their innermost thoughts with her, do you have any responsibility to intervene?” (p. 301)

Fortner use of probing questions is useful as the reader examines her own ethical system. While the world tends to be governed by the Utilitarian system of ethics, his case studies give readers, particularly professors and students, an opportunity to explore their sense of right and wrong.

Each chapter ends with thoughtful questions. Here’s an example from page 179 from chapter 6, “Who’s Who in the Online World.”

If companies can know where you are throughout the day by following your data trail and GPS coordinates over a span of several days, and make their pitches to you based on evaluating that trail, should they be able to do so? Does it matter whether you explicitly gave permission to all the organizations doing that every day of your life?