



S3E4: Transcript

The Ethics of Communication

with Dr. Onora O'Neill

Tavia Gilbert

Welcome to Stories of Impact. I'm producer Tavia Gilbert, and in every episode of this podcast, journalist Richard Sergay and I bring you conversation about the newest scientific research on human flourishing, and how those discoveries can be translated into practical tools.

This season of the Stories of Impact podcast explores the vital question of citizenship in a networked age: how digital forms of communication can support democracy, or undermine it; how privacy has been affected by the digital revolution; and the impact on civic engagement when citizens' data is bought and sold.

To help us make sense of the inherent tensions in those questions, we'll hear from a philosopher whose work has focused on international justice and the roles of trust and accountability in public life.

Today Richard speaks with Baroness Onora O'Neill, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Cambridge University. Among her many distinctions, Prof. O'Neill was the 2017 recipient of the Berggruen Prize, awarded to "thinkers whose ideas have helped us find direction, wisdom, and improved self-understanding in a world being rapidly transformed by profound social, technological, political, cultural, and economic change."

Let's begin.

Richard Sergay: What does citizenship in a networked age mean?

Onora O'Neill: The thing that makes that complicated is it has meant very different things at different stages in a fairly rapid process of, let's say, high hopes at the beginning and really great worry now. If you go back 20 years, people thought that greater connectivity, which is the fundamental thing that a networked age provides, would enable more conversation between more citizens about more topics. It would include people. It would be the promise of democracy made real for many people for whom it has been inaccessible. That was the thought, the hope. I suppose the Arab Spring was one of the moments people started thinking about this.

But where we've now got is something extremely different, so I think one can't really talk about citizenship in a networked age without doing a little bit of very schematic history.

Richard Sergay: And that schematic history includes what?

Onora O'Neill: I think it includes, this is curious, the initial assumption that yes, the networked age is going to be a problem in the dictatorships, because it will enable surveillance of the people in a way that wasn't previously possible. And I suppose we think of the Uighurs in West China at present as the people who are most suffering from that. But the hope was that somehow it would all work out for the best and it would tend to improve democracy, not to improve surveillance.

I think that the big transition from that hope began with 9/11 and with the US very understandably seeking to introduce far more surveillance of its own citizens, inhabitants, and the citizens of most other places, as a response to an atrocious act of terror. And that has produced what people call surveillance societies, but that wasn't the end of it, because the thought that the National Security Agency in your country, or its equivalent, GCHQ here in the UK, were doing more surveillance of citizens didn't seem particularly threatening. The worry among knowledgeable people seems mainly to have been that it wasn't particularly effective either, but that's a separate issue.

What hadn't yet happened at the time of 9/11 was the commercial spread of surveillance and what is now called surveillance capitalism. And that has of course altered things a very great deal,

because surveillance is now something done both by states and by corporations.

Richard Sergay: So help me understand between the promise of what citizenship in a networked age could be and the reality, what's happened to citizenship itself?

Onora O'Neill: I think that's quite a long story and probably different in different parts of the world. I suppose if I took a slightly longer historical look, I'd be looking back to 1990. I had the good fortune to spend the year '89-'90 in Berlin, the whole year. And of course the fall of the wall is just a symbol, I was actually there before the television cameras by chance, but it was a magnificent symbol. And we thought that autocracies, dictatorships, the Eastern Bloc, the Soviet Bloc, was suddenly becoming open. And I fear many of us were rather complacent. We thought, well, if this happens, then can't we expect wonderful things and the spread of democracy? And that is what people hoped for some years. And I think in retrospect, we were perhaps naive.

Richard Sergay: So instead of the spread of democracy, what's happened?

Onora O'Neill: It isn't actually that the democracies have failed in the sense that they're not democracies, although some of them have been heavily reshaped by populism. That's a separate topic, I think, but it's certainly a noticeable topic. And what I think happened was essentially the recovery of the former Soviet Union, of Russia, and the rise of China, and the fact that the technologies were not being controlled by or disciplined by democratic structures. So that citizens were suddenly more likely to be the spied upon than the activists.

Richard Sergay: And the implications for, for citizenship are what?

Onora O'Neill: Well, I've been thinking over the last few days, quite a lot about why we think the right to privacy important, and some people are prepared to say, and I've read a number of pieces, I'm sure you have, too, where people say, well, privacy is just obsolete. People are getting over this thought that privacy matters. And I think they couldn't be more mistaken. That private space gives the individual citizen a little bit of protection to say things that may be unpopular or may be censored, or maybe he or she needs to try out without the thought that it will immediately be known to they know not

whom. And that is the reality of the present configuration of online life, isn't it, that you know not who is listening in on whatever you say, you write, you receive.

Richard Sergay: But one is not forced to participate in online life to have that sense of privacy, correct?

Onora O'Neill: No, indeed, and, and of course the right to privacy long antedates the digital revolution. And I was looking at, again, over the last few days of the formulation of the right, both in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the European Convention of Human Rights. And it's quaintly old-fashioned for the world we live in. It is, what is it, it's "the individual, his home, his private life and his correspondence." Now, of course we all do have correspondence, but of course there was no recognition of the degree to which privacy would be reshaped by the digital revolution. And I think we're just catching up with that now.

Richard Sergay: I mean, Mark Zuckerberg is famous for saying very early on in the beginnings of Facebook that essentially privacy is dead on the internet.

Onora O'Neill: And many have echoed him, it's quite a popular thought. I think he's become a bit more cautious since then.

Richard Sergay: And those lessons in terms of trying to carve out a space for private thoughts in terms of helping the public good. How would you go about doing that, now that the digital revolution is unfolding?

Onora O'Neill: Well, I think that I have come to the view, and it's not that I know the details of how this must be achieved, that it does include regulation of the tech companies. And this is extremely difficult, and I say it with great reluctance, but having watched as an amateur, I'm not a techie, watched as an amateur the last few years, I think that the power of the online processes that we now live with, which are essentially the commercialization of data about people, data that people scatter around by their very ordinary activities, like sending an email or tweeting or whatever they do, and they have no control over who receives it. They think they're addressing it to somebody, but of course it is being recorded and archived. And then the data brokers get going and it is being sold, and before they know it, they're receiving messages from, they know not whom.

Richard Sergay: So what does this mean for civic engagement and civic communication in your mind? Tell me both the positives and negatives as citizenship unfolds in this networked age.

Onora O'Neill: It's pretty difficult, isn't it? Because the positive things are clear enough, that you can participate. And in fact, during the pandemic, most of us have seen more of this. The individual can participate in discussions or listen in on discussions with think tanks, academics, journalists, and so on. There is an immediacy by which one can find things. But equally an arena has been created in which people seek to control and influence who sees what. And the targeting of individual users of digital technology seems to me to create enormous hazards for them. You don't know whether the message you receive has come from a bona fide source, and you will have very few ways of checking that.

Richard Sergay: Another way of putting it in the technical world are what are called deep fakes, which clearly are beginning to emerge in ways that are troubling.

Onora O'Neill: I agree with you. I tend to distinguish two sorts of problems from the point of view of individuals facing these technologies. One is what we might call the private harms. And that is the sort of thing, you know, suicide promotion, anorexia promotion, promotion of bogus remedies for serious illnesses, dare we say, there are quite a lot of these things. And that sort of private harm may indeed harm an individual. And we have miserable examples of young people in particular who have been persuaded to do things that are very harmful to them, of one sort and another. So I think the world on the whole understands what the private harms are. A lot of people now do realize that there are private harms, and there's a considerable effort by some of the tech companies to try to identify them and take down the material.

I worry, not being a techie myself, about how slow it sometimes is. And when I read, for example, that some footage of the massacre in Christchurch, New Zealand, was up days and days after the event, I realize that taking down is not a simple matter. And I take it that the reason is that the process of redistribution of sensational content is so rapid that it has got to places that people can't immediately identify via routes they can't identify very quickly.

But that's not our topic today, the private harms. I think they're very serious. I think we don't have remedies. I do think people are on the whole aware of them, and things like fact checking and taking down, do a certain amount.

I think we are just at the beginning of trying to think about the public harms, by which we mean the harms to serious journalism and the media, to publishing, and to democracy. And these are much harder because you can't say, "Take down any content that is false or misleading." It is, after all, part of the process of democratic debate, that somebody who has got ideas that other people think are completely bonkers can state them and will be met with reasonable engagement and some suggestions about what the evidence is and how one can check the evidence. And so we can't take the route with the public harms that generally seems as promising for the private harms.

Richard Sergay: I'm thinking that it is generally against the law, it is against the law here in the United States, and I'm sure in the UK, too, to yell "fire" in a theater, if there is no fire, right? So—

Onora O'Neill: You have taken John Stuart Mill's example from his chapter, if you go and look at the chapter, you will find he was talking about self-expression then. And he was saying self-expression is great, unless it happens to be in a context where you cause a harm, in this case, a stampede and people squashed, so. But that doesn't take us very far. That's only about self-expression.

Richard Sergay: So are we moving to a place where — and you used the term earlier in the conversation — where we do need to regulate these sorts of communications among platforms like a Facebook or a Twitter and others that provide enormous space for all sorts of communication, in order to try and better what we understand citizenship to be?

Onora O'Neill: My sense about this is that we have, after all, long, long experience of relying on certain intermediaries to achieve a degree of quality control in publication. So that when you think of the efforts, not just recently, but going back to the invention of printing, or let us say the spread of printing in Europe, and we understand the different roles of the editor, the translator, the publisher, the printer, and these intermediaries who are indeed regulated, but they're not told what within very broad limits they are to publish. But quality control

achieves a certain amount. And if we think about the traditions of print journalism, those old intermediaries have been enormously important. They were the way in which quality control was secured.

Now, there can be debate about them. Some people think that copyright is a barrier to communication. Some people think it's an enabler of good communication and so on, but broadly speaking, we've had these traditional intermediaries, and we've relied on them.

Richard Sergay: Tech companies like Facebook and Twitter call themselves a platform and not a media entity. And because of that, they can, they claim, allow any sort of discussion, almost, unless it crosses some line that they have come up with, to be engaged on their platforms. Is it time that governments such as the US or the UK step in and regulate these platforms to better civic engagement?

Onora O'Neill: Well, I think we are heading in that direction. And of course, if one follows them, and I don't very closely, but one notices the tech companies slightly altering their position, small step by small step. Time was that they thought the only sort of regulation that they could tolerate was self-regulation—in effect, not regulation. Then they moved a little bit and they think, regulation, but the sort that we want, and I've no doubt, a lot of lobbying goes on. But regulation is not our enemy. Good regulation achieves a lot. Whether you're thinking of building standards, water standards, all sorts of things. And online standards might be one of them.

Richard Sergay: Let's pivot the conversation to one of the virtues in the citizenship report that focuses on listening, which I know is an important issue for you. Where are we on listening as a civic virtue, and why is it so important?

Onora O'Neill: Well, in a world where a lot of people think shouting is the civic virtue, listening is quite hard, and it's also in a world in which we don't think about civility, listening is made even harder.

My own view is that some of this difficulty really antedates the digital revolution by some decades, that's to say, why do we hear so little about the various virtues that communication requires? For example, truthfulness, honesty, civility, decency, all things that are familiar to many of us from early childhood. And they seem to me to be important. Why are we so little focused on them? Why do people

constantly emphasize the standards that we have in the human rights documents, the right to freedom of expression and the right to privacy, and nothing else?

By the way, the only human right that mentions communication is actually the right to freedom of religion, where it says that you may manifest your religion alone or with others, but there's no mention of communication. It's a very thin set of standards that made it into the human rights documents. And yet people are tending to think, well, respect for human rights, that I get. What I don't get is all this other stuff that used to be part of ethics.

Richard Sergay: What does listening require?

Onora O'Neill: I think listening requires, first of all, keeping quiet while the other party speaks. Not interrupting. And I guess you've had some vivid experience of what it requires in the United States recently, but that seems to be the first thing. Paying attention, but also waiting and then addressing the position that the other party has articulated, not seeking to silence or bludgeon the other party, or to change the topic. So listening requires attention to content and some care in responding to content.

Richard Sergay: Requires shared values?

Onora O'Neill: Up to a point. I mean, as soon as you say "shared values," you have sort of cut yourself free from any thought that what matters about values is that they be well-grounded rather than that they happen to be shared. And I think it's one of the mid-20th century problems that slightly antedates the human rights documents that people started talking about shared values, as though the sharing is what made them reputable. Frankly, a lot of shared values are very disreputable.

Richard Sergay: So to bring it back to our earlier conversation around the digital revolution—in this 24/7, always-on world, what is the art of listening like when one is so overwhelmed with information?

Onora O'Neill: Probably a self-discipline, which maybe neither you nor I have, about not having the world delivering its thoughts or comments for 24/7. I think one has to, as it were, limit it. The other thing that seems to me helpful is to identify—and there aren't that number, but there are media that take the old standards seriously. I think

they do include the *New York Times* in the United States, although nobody's perfect, but I think they do include both the *Times* and the Manchester *Guardian* here. But a lot of our print media have been bastardized.

Richard Sergay: There is a term that has gained great currency, particularly over the last number of years, here in the US and in Western capitals, about a post-fact, post-truth society. How does listening impact that when facts that we all should agree to are taken into question?

Onora O'Neill: I think it's extremely difficult, as a practical matter, when somebody takes a superstition or a piece of fake news and insists that it is true, it's very difficult. Consider the debate around the people who become convinced that vaccination will harm their children. And of course the only thing that changes minds in some cases is the experience of somebody who, unlike others, refused vaccination and their child got desperately ill. In countries where people still experience, for example, measles, which is a horrible illness, people aren't quite so cavalier about rubbishing vaccination.

Richard Sergay: So how do we agree on facts? How do we agree on truth in an increasingly polarized world, if not societies?

Onora O'Neill: I think it's extremely difficult, but my sense is that you first have to, as it were, enable the other to trust that you are not entering the discussion just as a bully or someone who contradicts, you've got to listen, you've got to ask questions, you've got to start a conversation which is non-hostile. And that means very often taking it away from the things that are inflammatory, so-called fake news. I mean, bluntly, if it's fake it ain't news, and if it's news it jolly well shouldn't be fake. So fake news is a sort of oxymoron that's become fashionable because some people are peddling material that they probably know to be false, certainly a lot of other people know it's false, and calling it news.

Richard Sergay: How important is political leadership in trying reduce polarization and enhance citizenship?

Onora O'Neill: I think it's immensely important. And we've got a number of leaders in your country and mine, among others, who are not above some fake news.

Richard Sergay: So how do you encourage the better angels to take us down a different road? What would some of the solutions be?

Onora O'Neill: I'll tell you, the solutions, I do wish I had the solutions, because to go back to the digital technologies, one of the things that enables fake news to flourish is the possibility of using online connectivity to distribute it in versions that will appeal to particular audiences so that there is a highly manipulative aspect to spreading fake news, and it's appealing to some people. And obviously people don't like things that they think true and treasure being questioned. But you get back to those issues that you raised before about listening and questioning, and I think they are essential, but have to be done in a way that don't merely antagonize or lead to people being entrenched in whatever their particular *idée fixe* is.

Richard Sergay: Last topic that I'd like to focus on is decision-making in the citizenship report. Clearly listening as a civic virtue is incredibly important to making good decisions for the public good. Are we at risk at this point of not being able to make good decisions?

Onora O'Neill: I think that that is the case in some states, that bad decisions are being made.

Richard Sergay: And what do we do about it?

Onora O'Neill: We, being the citizens?

Richard Sergay: Mm-hmm.

Onora O'Neill: If we're lucky enough to live in a democracy, we try to use the institutions, even if they've already been damaged, to reestablish civic discussion. If we don't live in a democracy—and I think it's worrying to realize that the proportion of the world's population living in democracies is falling now, not rising. In some cases, it's a partial democracy, but impaired democracy—I think it's very much harder. If you're in a part of the world where censorship is pretty standard or you're at high risk if you say something that displeases the powers that be, it is much, much harder. Merely civilized listening and engagement with others is not going to turn the corner.

Richard Sergay: As a professor of philosophy and having read the greats from Plato on, where are we in the arc of history in terms of democracy? Is it at risk in your mind?

Onora O'Neill: Well, it's disappearing in some places. I mean, we can't pretend that it's safe everywhere. I think we can say that it's well entrenched in the traditional democracies. Well entrenched doesn't mean that it isn't being assailed.

Richard Sergay: And so of your reading of history, what do we need to do in terms of being better citizens?

Onora O'Neill: It's not, as it were, an enterprise for individuals, is it? I think that we need to try to improve the term, the terms rather, of debate in a way that leaves, we hope, more people to join us in listening to things. And we need to ask clever but inoffensive questions. It's no good making people feel like fools.

Richard Sergay: Are you an optimist about this possibility?

Onora O'Neill: Haha, am I an optimist? Uh, yes, I think I probably am, but I think it's going to take quite a lot of time, and I think that there will have to be some move in the direction of regulation.

One thing we haven't mentioned yet, because it's not a US theme in the way it is in Europe is whether data protection legislation can be made to do more of the work. And I'm afraid I'm a bit of a pessimist there. Data protection legislation, which we have in Europe, does seek to protect what are called personal data. Unfortunately, the tech companies have your personal data and use them as an item of trade.

Richard Sergay: So your sense being that those sorts of regulations are not going to work?

Onora O'Neill: The reason I think it's difficult to make them work is that the regulation is focused on certain sorts of content. Personal content is to be protected. My own view in thinking about communication, and that includes civic communication, is that we should think about the acts, the speech acts, the communication, what we're doing with words, not the words themselves. And it's all very beautiful to imagine a world in which we never let anybody's home address become public knowledge—it's not a world we live in, by the way—but that wouldn't actually be what's needed in order to give us the sort of security in communicating that we need.

You know, Plato said this quite astutely rather a long time ago, it's in a dialogue called *Phaedrus*, and the technology he's worried

about isn't digital, it's writing. Writing's rather new, and there are of course, lots of people who can't read, but what worries him is that, with the written word, as he puts it, "it roams around everywhere and doesn't know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not speak."

That's, you know, 400 years BC. And I think that digital technologies mean that we're all of us living in a world in which there's a great deal of speech content that wanders around and doesn't know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not speak.

Richard Sergay: So I guess my last question to you would be, how do we then become more discerning citizens?

Onora O'Neill: I think that some of the things that have long been discussed by philosophers of science, by epistemologists, by literary critics, by serious journalists are entirely the right track, that we look at the ethics of communication, not at the ethics for digital content, which is after all just content.

Richard Sergay: Great. Professor O'Neill, thank you very much for your time. You've been very gracious with it, and I'm sure we will continue this conversation.

Onora O'Neill: I'm sure we shall, Richard. Good to talk.

Tavia Gilbert: Most of my 20-year career has been focused in the audio space, so this episode with Professor O'Neill is particularly resonant for me. Listening is much of what I do, in addition to speaking, but, like so many of us, I know that my impulse to speak is often stronger than my eagerness to listen. Listening takes more effort: greater humility, more willingness to stay open, a commitment to paying attention. After all, that's what listening is: paying attention. And it's ethical to pay attention to the society in which we live and to our fellow citizens. I wonder if I remove the need to judge what I'm hearing, and instead, just allow room for whatever it is, without labeling it, if my listening skills will strengthen? Will you listen with me?

We'll be back with another episode in two weeks, continuing our

focus on Citizenship in a Networked Age. Richard will be speaking with Colin Mayer, Peter Moores Professor of Management Studies and Dean at the Said Business School at the University of Oxford. Prof. Mayer speaks to Richard about the role of business institutions in building resilient and cohesive communities, and the necessity of trust in whether civilization itself will be sustained. Here's Dr. Mayer:

Colin Mayer:

Trust: It is the glue that keeps societies together. It's the glue that keeps us civilized in the way in which we behave and respect each other. And when we lose trust in others, then we lose the basis on which we can interact and the basis on which we can create community. It's also, and this is not sufficiently well understood, the fundamental basis of the economic success and prosperity of individuals, of companies, of institutions, and of economies around the world. So it is of fundamental importance.

Tavia Gilbert:

We look forward to bringing you the full interview with Professor Mayer in our next episode. In the meantime, if you liked today's Story of Impact, we'd be grateful if you'd take a moment to subscribe to the podcast, rate and review it, and if you'd share or recommend this program to someone you know. Your support helps us reach new audiences. You can hear all of our podcasts at storiesofimpact.org, and you can find Stories of Impact videos at www.templetonworldcharity.org/our-impact.

This has been the Stories of Impact podcast, with Richard Sergay and Tavia Gilbert. This episode written and produced by Talkbox and Tavia Gilbert. Assistant producer Katie Flood. Music by Aleksander Filipiak. Mix and master by Kayla Elrod. Executive Producer Michele Cobb.

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