

Values-Based Decision-Making in the Digital Age

Lindsey Harness, PhD.

In an era when nearly every aspect of life is influenced by technology, fostering responsible digital citizenship among youth is more critical than ever. As educators, parents/guardians, and policymakers, we bear the responsibility of equipping young people with the skills and values they need to navigate the digital landscape thoughtfully and ethically. This article explores a values-based decision-making framework that I hope can empower youth to make deliberate and ethical choices about technology use.

Understanding the Importance of Values-Based Decisions

Digital technologies profoundly shape how young people learn, communicate, and engage with the world. For instance, in Slovenia, 87% of residents used the Internet every day or almost every day, and 85% used it several times a day. This was most frequently among younger individuals aged 16 to 24 (99%), with 73% encountering untrue or questionable information online (Republic of Slovenia Statistical Office, October 2024). In the United States, 96% of teens aged 13 to 17 own smartphones. The number of teens who report they are online “almost constantly” has doubled since 2014-2015 (Pew Internet Research Center, 2024).

This pervasive connectivity underscores the need for a framework that helps youth critically evaluate their digital interactions. In 1998, Neil Postman, a renowned media theorist, argued that technology should serve human purposes and align with enduring human values. As Postman (1998) argues, “Our youth must be shown that not all worthwhile things are instantly accessible and that there are levels of sensibility unknown to them.” Yet, this alignment between values and technological use requires intentionality—a commitment to fostering curiosity, resilience, and the pursuit of meaningful experiences over superficial engagements.

The Benefits and Consequences of Technology

Technology, when aligned with values, holds immense potential. It enables global relationships, cultural exchange, and the exploration of diverse perspectives. Platforms like TikTok, for example, allow young people to share experiences and build connections across borders, creating opportunities for empathy and understanding. Shalini Mitra (2004) argues, “The Internet has transformed popular cultural by providing a virtual forum in which different communities and groups can produce a ‘presence’ that might have been denied to them in the ‘real world’” (p. 492). Technology provides a space to gain social knowledge about and experiment with different aspects of oneself.

However, technology also presents challenges. Cyberbullying, misinformation, and digital addiction are prevalent issues. For example, 59.2% of adolescent girls in the United States have experienced cyberbullying, compared to 49.5% of boys (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2023). Additionally, many young people struggle to distinguish between news, advertisements, and opinions online. Addressing these challenges requires empowering youth to critically assess their digital environments and make ethical choices.

Core Dimensions of Values-Based Decision-Making

The values-based decision-making framework developed at Alverno College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin emphasizes three core dimensions: **Value Examination and Interpretation**, **Moral Sensitivity**, and **Moral and Ethical Reasoning**. Together, these dimensions provide a structured approach for guiding youth toward responsible digital citizenship.

Value Examination and Interpretation

This dimension involves identifying and reflecting on personal values and the values of others. It encourages youth to ask questions such as, “Why am I using this technology?” and “Is this use aligned with my values?” For example, a person reflects on whether scrolling through social media aligns with their value of self-respect or if it fosters a negative self-perception. By connecting technology use to values like curiosity and connectedness, youth can make more intentional decisions about how they show up in the digital landscape. Central to this dimension is that understanding one's values and the influence of others' values is foundational for decision-making. Doing so requires active listening, intentional introspection, and interpersonal relationships.

Educators adopting this understanding hope for the student to become more conscious and systematic in identifying the values and principles of their lives. The student comes to realize that their values are embedded in the diverse relationships of their lives as they experience, witness, and learn from the array of values influencing other people's decisions.

Take a few moments to think about how you have used technology today. Perhaps how you are using technology in this exact moment. Consider the value that prompted you to choose the technology and to use it in the way that you did. Maybe you sent a text message to a friend about something that you learned from an article you read today. That would be an example of using technology to embrace curiosity, the sharing of knowledge, and/or creating a sense of identification and connectedness with a friend. Perhaps you also came across a news reel on Instagram that left you feeling concerned. This is an opportunity in which we can ask ourselves and model for youth critical questions about the role technology plays in the enactment of our values.

Moral Sensitivity

Empathy and understanding are essential for navigating diverse digital interactions. Moral sensitivity involves recognizing and respecting the values of others, even when they differ from one's own. Experiential learning is paramount to understanding this dimension of a values-based framework. For instance, in the Emerging Technologies course I teach, students analyze a website's accessibility from the perspective of a person with a disability, proposing ways in which the website can be redesigned to enhance its inclusivity. Then, students reflect on questions, such as "How does understanding these diverse perspectives shape our decision-making when using or designing technology?" and "What role does empathy play in creating a more ethical and inclusive digital environment?" My hope is that students draw a connection between how empathy should and can be embedded in all technological systems, recognizing the importance of designing technology that reflects diverse needs. At the core of this dimension is the belief that empathy and understanding are crucial for navigating diverse digital interactions.

The educators central to the creation of the Values-Based Decision-Making framework believed that crucial to contemporary life is its cultural diversity. Such diversity is an opportunity for growth but also a challenge, and the valuing process must incorporate tools for navigating it.

Moral and Ethical Reasoning

This dimension can equip youth to address complex digital dilemmas, such as balancing privacy with public safety or combating bias in algorithms. Using real-world case studies, such as the ethical debates surrounding facial recognition technology (see the Algorithmic Justice League led by Dr. Joy Buolamwini doing important work in the area of digital ethics), educators can help students explore different ethical frameworks.

Central to this dimension is recognizing that applying decisions involves the formulation of a living ethic. To engage in responsible, ethical decision-making means to use specific frameworks to think about more positions on important questions and issues, and to act with integrity. One way I apply this dimension of the values-based framework is incorporating case studies related to digital dilemmas in a course. For example, students learn about the 2021 Facial Recognition Controversy and explore different ethical frameworks that are demonstrated within public discourse surrounding the technology. These might include deontological ethics (emphasizing individual rights), utilitarian ethics (weighing societal benefits), or virtue ethics (promoting fairness and accountability). Students are encouraged to reflect on where their values stand within these frameworks, helping them to identify and name the values that are central to how they navigate the world.

The Developmental Process of Decision-Making

Values-based decision-making is not a skill that develops overnight. At Alverno College, this ability is cultivated through a progressive, iterative process. Students begin by understanding the emergence of values in everyday life, then connect those values to behavior, and eventually critically evaluate how their values interact with broader social systems.

For example, in an intermediate-level exercise, students might examine how family values influence decisions about media consumption. At advanced levels, students integrate their learning across disciplines, considering the ethical implications of emerging technologies such as wearable health devices.

A Call to Action

The responsibility to foster values-based decision-making extends beyond educators. Parents, guardians, and policymakers must also model intentionality guiding their own technology use and engage youth in open conversations about digital choices. As Postman (1998) wisely observed, technology should not control us; rather, we must control how it shapes our lives.

In the end, technology should not be judged as “good” or “bad.” To do so would be to dismiss its wondrous possibilities or to discount its potential consequences. Instead, we need to proceed with caution when using technologies, creating technologies, and speaking about technologies, and we need to create brave spaces for youth to do the same.

This is not a time in which adults should think they know better than youth about what it means to grow up in a digitally connected world. To do so would be a mistake as it would neglect the insights of those whose future will be widely impacted by the decisions of today. Rather, this is the time in which to ask about their observations, experiences, and ideas about digital citizenship and empower them to make decisions based on *their* values.

By adopting a values-based framework, we empower youth to approach technology with intentionality and integrity. The future of technology is not just in the hands of innovators but in the hearts of those who do and will impact the next generation. We have a shared responsibility in understanding that technology is not mythic. It does not come into being without human agency. What it becomes is dependent upon what we allow it to become. We shape how it can be used and we are shaped by how it is used. Together, we can ensure that technology serves as a tool for connection, learning, and ethical progress—not as a force that diminishes our shared humanity. Youth are paramount to this endeavor.

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