

Book of the Year

Kevin Healey wins award for “Ethics and Religion in the Age of Social Media”

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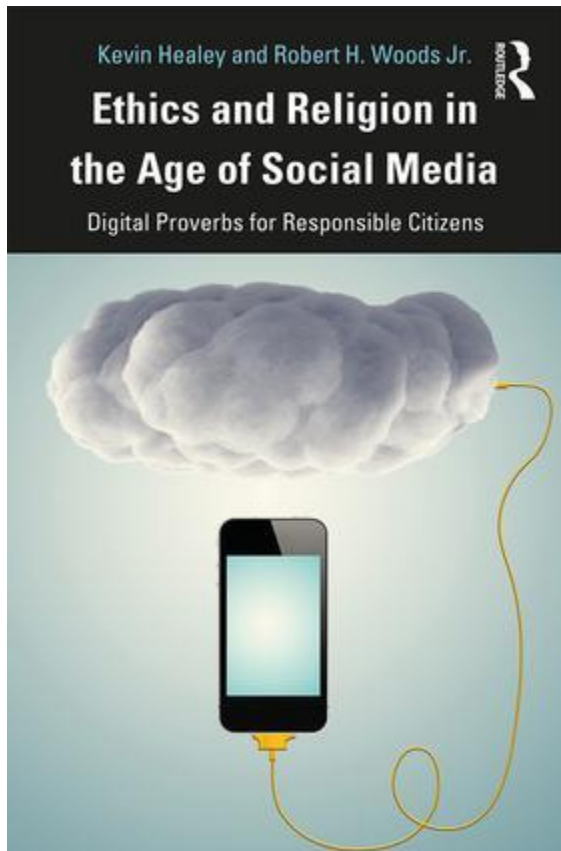
KEVIN HEALEY, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF COMMUNICATION AT UNH.

“A beautiful book,” says Andrew Harris – rigorous in research yet accessible. A book likely to make its way onto many a syllabus, he suggests.

Harris, a vice president for the Religious Communication Association (RCA), is referring to “Ethics and Religion in the Age of Social Media: Digital Proverbs for Responsible Citizens” (Routledge, 2020), a book co-authored by [Kevin Healey](#), UNH associate professor of [communication](#), and Robert H. Woods Jr., professor of communication and

media at Spring Arbor University in Michigan. RCA has named the publication their Book of the Year.

In “Ethics and Religion in the Age of Social Media,” Healey and Woods contend that popular digital platforms promote mistaken assumptions about ethics and technology. Technology and efficiency are privileged over such virtues as moderation and humility, they say, leading many to believe that collecting, producing and sharing ever more reams of information is a virtue in itself and “the path to societal progress and personal happiness.” It’s not, they argue.



As one example, the algorithms that run platforms such as Facebook and Twitter tend to amplify disinformation, partisanship and conflict by promoting content that is divisive and emotionally charged, which produces more platform engagement, over content that is reasoned and thoughtful. These amplifications often reinforce existing social inequalities, says Healey, further marginalizing Black people, the LGBTQ community, women and other minority groups.

As an antidote of sorts to the negative effects of digital media, the book introduces five “proverbs” for living responsibly in the digital world, exposing aspects of technology that are often equated with virtues but are not: 1) information is not wisdom, 2) transparency is not authenticity, 3) convergence is not integrity, 4) processing is not judgment and 5) storage is not memory.

“The proverbs each has a corollary that suggests how to do things differently,” says Healey. “If each proverb says ‘no,’ i.e., information is *not* wisdom, then the corollaries

say ‘yes,’ i.e., we should ‘inform wisely.’ Inform wisely, strive for genuine — mutual and consensual — transparency; integrate diverse elements, meaning keep things separate when they ought to be; process information judiciously, i.e., include human judgment in the process; and remember who and what data storage is for. These are the basic principles to move forward.”

The book also offers practices for readers, such as using a typewriter for tasks like letter-writing, or creating poetry from a friend’s Facebook posts and sending it to them snail-mail. These practices can help us break the habits of thought we’ve developed around technology, says Healey.

“We couple these practices with big-picture initiatives like new business models and development strategies such as fair trade, sustainable design, workplace cooperatives, etc.,” Healey says. “And at the end of the book, we explain how to take MLK’s six principles of non-violent resistance and apply them directly to digital media ethics.”

Despite the dangers posed by our digital culture, the authors are hopeful about the future. In addition to critical engagement and practical exercises, they say “we need to remember what it means to be human, to remember what makes us fully human.”

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ON THE BOOKSHELF, FACULTY EXCELLENCE



University of New Hampshire

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