

MORALITY IN THE AGE OF VISIBILITY: ATTENTION, SENSITIVITY, AND ETHICAL RESPONSE

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Abstract

This article examines how ethical response is shaped under conditions of increasing visibility in the digital age. Contemporary individuals are continuously exposed to global crises, human suffering, and various forms of injustice, creating a widespread expectation that greater visibility leads to stronger ethical engagement. However, this study argues that increased visibility does not automatically strengthen the continuity or intensity of ethical response. Instead, ethical response is shaped through attention processes and temporal experience. The article develops the concept of moral attention to account for these dynamics. This concept highlights that individuals evaluate ethical situations within the limits of their cognitive and emotional resources, and that the distribution of attention determines the direction and intensity of ethical response. The speed, flow, and fragmentation of digital environments weaken sustained attention, transforming ethical response into a series of short-lived and fluctuating reactions. Furthermore, ethical response is not evenly distributed. Factors such as proximity, identity, media circulation, and algorithmic visibility shape which events receive attention and which are neglected. In this sense, ethical response becomes selective and discontinuous. The article challenges approaches that treat ethical sensitivity as a stable and universal orientation and instead proposes a relational and attention-based understanding of morality in the digital age. The analysis is illustrated with brief digital case examples—such as the rapid rise and fall of hashtag campaigns and algorithmic filtering—to ground theoretical claims in observable dynamics.

Keywords: moral attention; ethical response; attention economy; social acceleration; platform society

1. Introduction

Contemporary societies operate within an expanding regime of visibility on an unprecedented scale. Digital media environments continuously circulate global crises, humanitarian disasters, and everyday forms of injustice, exposing individuals to an uninterrupted flow of information. This transformation signals the consolidation of a network-based social structure. Castells (2010) argues that contemporary society is increasingly organized through networks and that flows of information have become the primary structuring force of social experience. In this context, visibility emerges not as a fixed quantity but as a dynamic process continuously reproduced through circulation practices within networks.

Wars, natural disasters, economic disruptions, and individual tragedies transcend spatial and temporal distances, becoming embedded in everyday experience. Visibility thus constitutes a fundamental dimension of social life.

A widely accepted assumption follows: greater visibility generates greater awareness, which in turn produces stronger ethical responses. This perspective, frequently reproduced in public discourse and academic debates, posits a direct relationship between visibility and ethical sensitivity. Indeed, it is often argued that modern media systems produce a global moral consciousness by making distant suffering visible (Boltanski, 1999). However, the relationship between visibility and ethical response does not follow a straightforward or automatic pattern.

Representations of crises and suffering that circulate intensively in digital environments do not necessarily translate into sustained ethical engagement. Under conditions in which attention spans are shortened, agendas shift rapidly, and transitions between events occur continuously, the continuity of ethical response becomes difficult to maintain. Rather than automatically strengthening ethical sensitivity, increased visibility may, under certain conditions, weaken and fragment moral attention. This suggests that the relationship between visibility and ethical response is not direct but mediated through cognitive and temporal processes. Consider, for example, the lifecycle of a typical social media campaign: a hashtag emerges, generates intense but brief visibility, and then recedes within days. The 2017 MeToo movement achieved widespread awareness, yet subsequent analysis showed that many individual cases of harassment did not receive sustained follow-up (Kende et al., 2021). Visibility alone did not produce continuity.

Explaining ethical response solely through normative orientations is therefore insufficient. Ethical evaluation must be understood in relation to attention processes and temporal experience. Simon (1971) argues that an abundance of information produces a scarcity of attention. Under conditions of intensified information flow, individuals have limited capacity to allocate attention to singular events. As a result, distinctions between what is ethically significant and insignificant are shaped through the distribution of attention.

The concept of moral attention provides a central analytical tool for understanding this transformation. It refers to the limited set of cognitive and emotional resources that individuals allocate in order to recognize, evaluate, and respond to ethical situations. This perspective reveals the limits of ethical response and challenges the assumption that ethical sensitivity constitutes an unlimited capacity.

The transformation of attention is further intensified by dynamics of social acceleration. Rosa (2013) argues that acceleration compresses experiential time and exposes individuals to an increasing number of stimuli within shorter temporal intervals. This compression erodes the depth and intensity of experience, leading to more superficial forms of evaluation. Similarly, digital environments produce cognitive and perceptual conditions that weaken sustained attention. Carr (2010) suggests that digital technologies undermine deep focus and encourage surface-level processing, while Crary (2015) highlights how regimes of continuous stimulation destabilize attention. Turkle (2011) further shows that constant connectivity weakens attentional continuity and promotes shallow forms of engagement. Taken together, these processes reorganize ethical evaluation around fragmentation rather than continuity.

The central question of this article can thus be formulated as follows: how is moral attention shaped under conditions of increasing visibility, and how does this transformation reshape the nature of ethical response? To address this question, the article examines the relationship between visibility and attention at a conceptual level, analyzes the fragmentation of attention in digital contexts, and explores the selective character of ethical response.

This article is designed as a theoretical and conceptual analysis that reconsiders the relationship between visibility, attention, and ethical response in the digital age. By bringing different theoretical approaches into dialogue through the concept of moral attention, it explains how ethical response is shaped within the limits of attention processes and temporal experience.

The article advances three main arguments. First, increased visibility does not automatically strengthen ethical sensitivity; rather, it produces a selective structure within the attention economy. Second, the speed and flow of digital environments fragment moral attention and weaken the continuity of ethical response. Third, ethical response is not a homogeneous orientation but a selective process shaped by attention, media circulation, and social positioning. From this perspective, morality must also be understood as a matter of attention.

2. Visibility and Moral Attention

With digitalization, the level of visibility within social experience has increased significantly. Everyday life is no longer constituted solely through directly experienced events but also through a continuous flow of images, news, and narratives circulating via media. Global crises, humanitarian disasters, and forms of injustice become part of individuals' fields of attention regardless of geographical distance. This expansion generates a strong expectation that ethical sensitivity will also expand, as increased exposure to events is assumed to produce a broader field of ethical awareness. However, the expansion of visibility does not guarantee a corresponding intensification of ethical response. The relationship between visibility and attention does not follow a linear trajectory but instead develops within a selective and tension-filled structure. As visibility expands, attention is distributed selectively according to its limited capacity.

At this point, the concept of moral attention provides analytical clarity. A crucial conceptual distinction must be introduced: moral attention has two analytically separable dimensions. First, cognitive attention refers to the basic perceptual process of noticing, becoming aware of, and orienting toward an event. It is the minimal condition for any ethical response to occur. Second, ethical attention refers to the deeper process of evaluation, deliberation, and the formation of a responsive stance. Ethical attention requires sustained focus and temporal duration; it involves asking not only “what is happening?” but also “what should I do about it?” While cognitive attention can be brief and reactive, ethical attention demands continuity. Digital environments are relatively effective at capturing cognitive attention but systematically undermine ethical attention by constantly redirecting focus. This distinction helps explain why individuals may be aware of many crises yet fail to develop sustained ethical responses.

Moral attention can thus be defined as the limited set of cognitive and emotional resources that individuals allocate in order to recognize, evaluate, and respond to ethically relevant situations. This approach shifts the analysis of ethical response beyond normative orientations and situates it within attention processes. Simon (1971) argues that an abundance of information produces a scarcity of attention, while Davenport and Beck (2001) emphasize that attention has become one of the scarcest resources in modern societies. As information increases, the attention allocated to each individual event decreases. Consequently, distinctions between what is ethically significant and insignificant are shaped through the distribution of attention. Ethical response thus emerges not as an unlimited capacity but as a process structured within the limits of attention.

The expansion of visibility multiplies the number of objects requiring ethical evaluation. Social media platforms and digital news flows expose users to diverse crises, tragedies, and injustices within very short time intervals. From war imagery and natural disasters to individual acts of violence and economic inequalities, a wide range of content appears consecutively within the same stream. This density increases the number of events that demand ethical response. However, the limited nature of attention resources means that this multiplication necessarily involves processes of selection and exclusion. While many events may become visible, they do not generate equivalent ethical responses. This inequality reveals the boundaries of ethical sensitivity.

Everyday digital experience further intensifies this selectivity. Users encounter multiple and often conflicting ethical demands within a short period of time. Each encounter calls for evaluation, yet these demands are not met with equal intensity. Attention constantly shifts, and the time allocated to each event remains limited. This limitation hinders the deepening of ethical response.

Ethical evaluation begins but is often interrupted before it can be completed. Ethical response is therefore shaped not only by normative orientations but also by the distribution of attention. Where attention is directed, ethical response intensifies; where it is not, it weakens.

The limited nature of attention also undermines the continuity of ethical response. Individuals exposed to multiple events simultaneously cannot allocate equal attention to each of them. Some events attract intense attention, while others quickly fade from visibility. What becomes decisive is not necessarily the intrinsic importance of an event but its mode of presentation, its repetition, and the networks through which it circulates. Sontag (2003) argues that the ethical impact of representations of suffering depends on how they are framed. Such framing situates ethical response at the intersection of media circulation and attention dynamics. Ethical sensitivity thus emerges as an effect produced within the organization of circulation rather than as an inherent property of content. To illustrate: during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the same platform (Twitter) displayed images of overwhelmed hospitals, then climate disaster footage, then police violence—all within seconds. Each demanded ethical attention, but users could not allocate equal cognitive or emotional resources to all. The result was a rapid cycling of concern rather than sustained engagement.

Processes of social acceleration further intensify these dynamics. Rosa (2013) shows that the compression of time in modern societies transforms modes of experience. While exposure expands, the duration of experience contracts. Events remain in public attention for shorter periods, rapidly replaced by new ones. Under such conditions, ethical evaluation does not deepen but instead takes the form of rapidly produced and quickly abandoned responses. Ethical response emerges, yet it fails to consolidate into a stable orientation.

In this context, ethical response takes on a fragmented character. Individuals generate short-lived yet intense reactions to different events, but these reactions rarely develop into sustained engagement. Waves of sensitivity that emerge on social media dissolve quickly and are replaced by new agendas. This pattern makes the discontinuity of moral attention clearly visible. Ethical response manifests less as continuity and more as fluctuation.

The concept of moral attention rejects the explanation of this fragmentation as an individual deficiency and instead locates it within the structural organization of attention processes continuously reproduced by digital circulation regimes. The flow logic of digital platforms encourages rapid consumption and exposes users to an ongoing stream of stimuli. This dynamic operates within a platform-based ecosystem. van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018) argue that digital environments function as platform structures that organize social interaction. Gillespie (2018) shows that platforms regulate public visibility, while Bucher (2018) demonstrates that algorithms shape the flow of attention. Within this framework, which content becomes prominent is determined by platform logics, and attention ceases to be a purely individual preference, becoming structurally guided. This structuring shapes ethical response by making certain events visible while pushing others into the background.

This transformation leads to shorter attention spans and a weakening of sustained focus. Carr (2010) argues that digital technologies erode deep attention and encourage surface-level processing, while Turkle (2011) suggests that constant connectivity weakens attentional continuity and promotes shallow forms of engagement. Under these conditions, ethical evaluation processes remain at the level of short-term reactions rather than deep reflection.

The temporal dimension is therefore central to ethical response. Ethical evaluation requires time, continuity, and sustained attention. Understanding the context of an event and forming an appropriate ethical stance cannot occur instantaneously. Fragmented attention interrupts this process, as individuals shift to new events before evaluation is complete. Ethical response thus remains superficial and often dissolves before reaching completion. This dissolution reveals the structural limits of ethical response.

In conclusion, the relationship between visibility and attention must be reconsidered. While increasing visibility multiplies ethical objects, the limited nature of attention resources produces an inevitable hierarchy among them. This hierarchy is shaped less by normative importance than by the dynamics of the attention economy and media circulation. Ethical response, therefore, emerges as a selective process structured at the intersection of attention, media systems, and temporal experience. Ethical sensitivity does not simply expand; it is redistributed.

3. The Fragmentation of Attention

The expansion of visibility brought about by digitalization has fundamentally transformed how content is experienced. One of the most significant dimensions of this transformation is the loss of continuity in attention, which increasingly takes on a fragmented form. As everyday experience is shaped by a continuous stream of stimuli, individuals' capacity to sustain attention on a single event diminishes. This shift directly affects the cognitive foundations of ethical evaluation and redefines the conditions under which ethical judgment is formed.

The fragmentation of attention cannot be explained as an individual deficit. Rather, it must be understood within the communicative environments that structure how attention is directed. Digital platforms operate through a flow logic that continuously exposes users to new content. This structure does not produce continuity but interruption. Users rapidly shift from one piece of content to another, and their engagement with each remains brief, superficial, and transient. Attention thus moves away from sustained focus on a single object and becomes dispersed. This dispersion provides a key analytical framework for understanding the conditions under which ethical evaluation is weakened.

This process becomes more visible through debates on the attention economy. The abundance of information transforms attention into a scarce resource (Davenport & Beck, 2001). Digital platforms are designed to capture and retain user attention, yet this design manages attention by fragmenting rather than sustaining it (Williams, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). More recent studies show that social media architectures keep users in a state of continuous stimulation, systematically eroding attentional continuity (Newport, 2021; Hari, 2022). In this context, attention ceases to be merely an individual capacity and becomes an object shaped by competition, design, and control. Not only how attention is directed but also who directs it and through which mechanisms becomes increasingly decisive.

In digital environments, the direction of attention is shaped by algorithmic ranking and recommendation systems. The content users encounter is organized according to platform logics of visibility and engagement. This organization produces filtering mechanisms that determine which events become prominent and which remain marginal. Algorithms do not simply rank content; they actively shape attention flows and promote specific modes of experience (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2018). Recent research demonstrates that these systems anticipate user behavior and pre-structure attention in advance (Kitchin, 2021). In such an environment, attention extends beyond individual preference and emerges as a process structured by platform architectures. This structuring indirectly shapes the direction of ethical response.

The fragmentation of attention must also be understood in relation to conditions of continuous stimulation. Crary (2015) argues that regimes of uninterrupted stimulation in late capitalist societies transform perceptual experience and render individuals constantly vulnerable to attentional disruption. Continuous stimulation makes it difficult for attention to deepen around a single object. Under these conditions, ethical evaluation ceases to be a process requiring temporal intensity and instead becomes confined to momentary reactions. This compression does not simply weaken ethical judgment but reorganizes it within structural constraints, limiting evaluative capacity along specific directions. A concrete example: the average user spends only a few seconds viewing a social media post before scrolling.

An image of a humanitarian crisis may generate a momentary empathetic response, but as soon as the next post appears—perhaps a meme or an advertisement—that response is interrupted. The ethical evaluation that began remains incomplete.

Transformations in temporal experience further intensify these dynamics. Social acceleration compresses experiential time and interrupts evaluative processes (Rosa, 2013). As the duration of experience shortens, the time required to interpret events and form judgments also diminishes. Evaluation processes are interrupted before completion and are replaced by new stimuli. This discontinuity undermines the continuity of ethical response and transforms it into a sequence of transient reactions.

Cognitive transformations constitute another dimension of this process. Digital media use weakens the capacity for deep attention and sustained thinking (Carr, 2010). These changes directly affect the formation of ethical judgment. Evaluating complex contexts, considering multiple perspectives, and developing coherent positions require sustained attention. When this structure weakens, ethical evaluation becomes increasingly superficial. The transformation of ethical response cannot therefore be separated from changes in cognitive capacity.

Emotional processes are also reshaped through the fragmentation of attention. The continuous flow of changing content produces emotions in short-lived waves. Empathy, anger, and sadness shift rapidly from one object to another without sustained engagement. This fluctuation disrupts emotional continuity and undermines the stability of ethical response. When emotions fail to sustain themselves, ethical responsibility also struggles to endure.

In this context, attention operates at the intersection of cognitive and emotional orientations. The object of attention becomes the object of emotional investment. However, when attention shifts rapidly, this investment cannot develop into a lasting relation. This dynamic constitutes one of the central mechanisms limiting the intensity and durability of ethical response. Rather than forming sustained relations, ethical response oscillates between moments of intense concentration and rapid dissipation.

The fragmentation of attention also transforms modes of public discourse. Long-term debates are replaced by rapid and ephemeral agendas. Discussions surrounding particular issues are interrupted before they can deepen and are quickly displaced by new topics. This structure leads to the superficial treatment of ethical issues and produces fluctuating patterns of public sensitivity.

This process simultaneously accelerates forgetting. The constant redirection of attention makes it difficult for events to acquire a lasting place in collective memory. Events rapidly gain visibility and disappear just as quickly. This cycle weakens the continuity of ethical responsibility. Forgetting, in this context, is no longer a passive process but an actively produced outcome of the attention economy.

The fragmentation of attention thus emerges as one of the central challenges of the digital age. It reshapes not only cognitive capacity but also ethical evaluation and emotional continuity. Under these conditions, ethical response loses its sustained character and takes on a discontinuous form. This requires ethical life to be reconsidered in relation to attention processes and their structural and technological contexts. Ethical response does not simply weaken; it is reconfigured within the dynamics of fragmentation.

4. The Selectivity of Ethical Response

The expansion of visibility increases the number of objects subject to ethical evaluation within the public sphere. However, this proliferation does not result in all events receiving equal ethical attention or response. Contemporary social experience is characterized by a structure in which certain events generate intense attention and sensitivity, while others receive only limited engagement. Ethical response is not distributed evenly within this structure; rather, it intensifies and recedes according to specific dynamics. Ethical sensitivity, therefore, does not expand as an ever-growing capacity but emerges as a redistributed orientation.

The direction of ethical response is closely tied to the meaning that events hold for individuals. Proximity plays a central role in shaping this meaning. Geographic, cultural, and symbolic proximity increases the likelihood that certain events will receive greater attention. Bauman (2011) argues that moral responsibility in modern societies is often limited to the immediate sphere and weakens as distance increases. Contemporary research similarly shows that individuals develop stronger emotional and ethical responses to events they perceive as closer to themselves (Bloom, 2016; Cameron & Payne, 2020). Ethical attention thus takes shape not as a universal orientation but as one concentrated within relations of proximity. Ethical response emerges as a dynamic that weakens with distance and intensifies with closeness.

Identity and belonging constitute another key axis shaping the selectivity of ethical response. Individuals tend to direct greater attention toward events associated with groups with which they identify. This orientation renders certain forms of suffering and injustice more visible and more significant, while others remain marginal. Calhoun (2009) argues that collective identities define the boundaries of public sensitivity. More recent studies demonstrate that identity-based attention patterns become sharper in digital environments and intensify within echo chambers (Sunstein, 2017; Bail, 2021). Ethical response thus operates less as the expression of a universal capacity and more as a process structured by social positioning. Identity functions as a filter that organizes the direction of attention.

Algorithmic visibility adds a further layer to this selectivity. Pariser (2011) introduced the concept of the “filter bubble” to describe how personalization algorithms selectively present content based on user data, thereby limiting exposure to diverse perspectives. More recent work by Bruns (2019) shows that algorithmic gatekeeping does not merely reflect user preferences but actively constructs what is visible. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), and TikTok use engagement metrics (clicks, shares, dwell time) to determine which content is amplified. This means that an event’s ethical salience is not a function of its objective importance but of its capacity to generate measurable engagement. Content that provokes outrage or intense emotion is prioritized, while slow-moving crises (e.g., long-term poverty, environmental degradation) receive less algorithmic visibility. Consequently, ethical response becomes biased toward emotionally intense, easily digestible events and away from complex, chronic issues.

Media circulation operates as a central mechanism shaping the direction of ethical attention. The repetition of events, their dramatic presentation, and their wide dissemination contribute to the prominence of particular content. Sontag (2003) argues that the ethical impact of images of suffering depends on their framing. Contemporary media research shows that digital platforms regulate the distribution of visibility and thereby shape the direction of ethical response (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Gillespie, 2018). Ethical sensitivity, in this sense, is formed within regimes of circulation, while ethical response takes shape within the limits imposed by these regimes.

Selectivity is also linked to processes of repetition and familiarity. Continuous exposure to similar content may initially generate strong reactions, but over time this effect weakens. Cohen (2001) argues that repeated representations of suffering carry the risk of desensitization. More recent studies show that excessive exposure in digital environments can reduce empathy and produce what has been described as “compassion fatigue” (Moeller, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2013; Västfjäll et al., 2014). This process weakens the continuity of ethical response and leads to fluctuating patterns of attention. Reactions may intensify, but they rarely develop into sustained ethical engagement.

The selectivity of ethical response is also closely related to emotional thresholds. Not all events generate the same level of emotional response. Some produce strong emotional impact, while others elicit only limited engagement. This differentiation is shaped less by the intrinsic content of events than by how they are represented and emotionally framed. As Ahmed (2015) argues, emotions are not inherent properties of objects but acquire meaning through social circulation and orientation toward particular objects.

Emotional thresholds thus function as implicit mechanisms determining which events are perceived as ethically significant. Events that fall below these thresholds often fail to generate ethical response.

In this context, ethical response assumes a fluctuating rather than continuous form. Certain events generate brief moments of intense sensitivity, but this intensity quickly dissipates and is replaced by new concerns. Fassin (2012) argues that humanitarian sensibility often takes shape around momentary intensifications rather than sustained engagement. This cycle makes it difficult for ethical engagement to achieve continuity and prevents ethical response from becoming a stable orientation. The 2015 “Alan Kurdi” image generated a sudden wave of concern about refugee deaths, yet policy changes were minimal and attention faded within weeks (Chouliaraki, 2013). The selectivity of response—intense but short-lived—illustrates the structural dynamics described here.

The selectivity of ethical response must therefore be understood in relation to the limits of attention and time. Individuals cannot attend to all events simultaneously, and this inevitably produces processes of prioritization. These processes are shaped less by conscious choice than by the structuring of attention itself. Which events become prominent and which remain marginal are determined by media circulation, algorithmic visibility, and emotional thresholds. Ethical sensitivity thus does not follow a random distribution but takes shape under specific structural conditions. Ethical response is therefore selected, directed, and constrained.

For this reason, the selectivity of ethical response should not be interpreted as an individual deficiency. Rather, it is produced through the structural features of communication environments, media circulation, and social relations. Individuals orient themselves toward certain events while disengaging from others within this structure. This orientation reveals the limits of ethical capacity and explains why ethical response cannot be evenly distributed. Ethical sensitivity, in this sense, is not an individual preference but a structurally shaped orientation.

In the age of visibility, ethical response takes shape within a fundamentally selective structure. This selectivity is determined less by the objective importance of events than by attention dynamics, identity relations, and media circulation. Understanding the distribution of ethical sensitivity requires analyzing these processes together. Such an approach moves beyond assumptions that treat ethical response as a homogeneous orientation and instead reveals it as a context-dependent, variable, and structurally constrained process. Ethical response does not simply decline; it changes direction.

5. The Paradox of Digital Morality

In the digital age, ethical life unfolds within a context in which the relationships between visibility, attention, and response are fundamentally reconfigured. While increasing visibility multiplies the objects of ethical evaluation, the limitations and fragmentation of attention reshape the nature of ethical response. This transformation reveals a constitutive tension within moral life. On the one hand, the capacity to witness a greater number of events expands; on the other, the possibility of transforming this witnessing into sustained ethical engagement diminishes. Moral experience in the digital age thus acquires a paradoxical character, oscillating between expansion and limitation. Digital morality should therefore be understood not in terms of increase or decline, but as a tension between expansion and constraint.

The first dimension of this paradox can be understood through the relationship between visibility and engagement. Boltanski (1999) argues that witnessing distant suffering generates a certain form of sensitivity, yet this sensitivity rarely translates into action. Encounters with mediated suffering produce short-lived intensities of attention and emotion, but these intensities do not evolve into sustained practices of responsibility. A structural gap emerges between attention and action. Contemporary studies show that emotional responses in digital environments often remain at a symbolic level and fail to translate into behavior (Chouliaraki, 2013; Papacharissi, 2015).

Visibility activates ethical response, yet it does not generate the continuity necessary to sustain it. Ethical response emerges but dissolves before forming a lasting ethical relation.

The framing of moral issues within media environments plays a decisive role in shaping this dissolution. Silverstone (2007) argues that witnessing acquires ethical meaning only when it is connected to responsibility. In digital environments, however, witnessing often remains at the level of fleeting encounters. The flow logic of platforms encourages rapid consumption and weakens the continuity of attention. Under these conditions, ethical response loses its capacity to sustain relationships and becomes confined to brief moments of attention. Witnessing occurs, but responsibility does not deepen; ethical relations dissolve before they can be established.

The second dimension of the paradox emerges in the tension between increasing information and limited capacity for action. Digital environments enable individuals to access vast amounts of information in a short time. However, the expansion of information does not produce a corresponding increase in ethical action. As Beck (2011) emphasizes in his analysis of the risk society, the visibility of risks does not necessarily lead to an equivalent expansion in the capacity to act upon them. Information proliferates, yet action does not expand. Ethical awareness increases, but its practical translation remains limited. The gap between knowledge and action thus becomes more visible rather than diminishing.

This limitation leads ethical response to be expressed through practices oriented toward the production of visibility. Social media posts, hashtag campaigns, and short-lived expressions of support render ethical positions publicly visible. While these practices may generate awareness, they rarely translate into direct intervention. Dean (2009) argues that a significant gap emerges between expression and effect in digital communication. Ethical response thus shifts from producing action to signaling position. Response exists, yet its impact remains limited; visibility increases while intervention weakens.

The third dimension of the paradox arises from the tension between individual responsibility and structural conditions. Digital environments expose individuals to a multitude of ethical issues, yet addressing these issues often requires structural interventions beyond individual action. This situation complicates the perception of responsibility. Giddens (2000) argues that increasing knowledge in modern societies generates uncertainty regarding action. Under these conditions, ethical response loses direction and becomes fragmented. A sense of responsibility persists, but the pathways through which it can be translated into action remain unclear.

Within this framework, digital morality takes shape through the tension between high visibility and limited capacities for attention and action. Individuals are confronted with numerous ethical demands, yet their responses remain selective, fragmented, and often temporary. This structure does not signal the disappearance of ethical life but rather its transformation. Ethical response does not decline; it is reconfigured into a form marked by discontinuity.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined how the relationship between increasing visibility and ethical response is shaped in the digital age. In contemporary social contexts, individuals are exposed to a vast number of crises, forms of suffering, and injustices, generating a strong expectation that ethical sensitivity will expand accordingly. However, the analysis has demonstrated that increased visibility does not guarantee the continuity of ethical response. When considered together with attention processes and temporal experience, visibility reveals that ethical life is organized within a complex and tension-laden structure. Ethical sensitivity expands, yet this expansion does not produce continuity.

The conceptual framework developed in this article is structured around the notion of moral attention. This concept demonstrates that ethical response cannot be explained solely through normative orientations but must be understood within the limits of individuals' cognitive and emotional capacities. As information intensifies, the scarcity of attention becomes more pronounced, reducing the amount of attention that can be allocated to each event (Simon, 1971).

Under these conditions, ethical evaluation becomes dependent on the distribution of attention. Ethical response is therefore shaped not only by what is visible but also by how attention is directed and with what intensity.

The fragmentation of attention further reveals how these limits operate. The speed, flow, and discontinuity of digital environments make it difficult for individuals to sustain focus on a single event and push ethical evaluation toward short-lived reactions (Rosa, 2013). Ethical response loses its character as sustained engagement and takes on a discontinuous form. Ethical relations may emerge, but they rarely consolidate into stable orientations; they form and dissolve.

This transformation highlights the selective character of ethical response. Ethical engagement is shaped not only by the content of events but also by the nature of the relationships established with them. Buber (2003) and Levinas (1991) emphasize that direct encounters intensify ethical relations, whereas mediated encounters tend to weaken their continuity. In digital contexts, encounters are predominantly mediated, limiting the durability of ethical relations. Ethical response is therefore unevenly distributed, intensifying around certain events while quickly fading in others.

The relationship between visibility and action must also be reconsidered within this framework. Mediated representations of crises and suffering generate forms of sensitivity, yet these rarely translate into sustained practices of action. Distant witnessing produces short-term intensifications of attention but does not develop into enduring responsibility. Ethical response often takes symbolic and temporary forms: visibility increases, while intervention remains limited.

6.1 Limitations of the Study

As a theoretical and conceptual analysis, this article does not provide empirical testing of its claims. The arguments presented here are intended to generate hypotheses for future research rather than to offer definitive conclusions about causal relationships. The illustrative examples (hashtag campaigns, algorithmic filtering, the Alan Kurdi image) are suggestive but not systematically analyzed. Furthermore, the analysis focuses primarily on Western digital platforms (Twitter, Facebook, TikTok) and may not fully capture dynamics in non-Western media ecosystems. Finally, the article does not address potential individual or collective counter-strategies—such as digital minimalism, attention protection practices, or platform reform movements—that might mitigate the fragmentation effects described.

6.2 Directions for Future Research

Future empirical research could operationalize the concept of moral attention in several ways. Experimental studies might measure how different platform designs (e.g., infinite scroll vs. paginated interfaces) affect the duration of ethical attention. Longitudinal studies could track how exposure to multiple crises influences desensitization over time. Comparative platform analyses could examine whether certain architectures (e.g., algorithmic feeds vs. chronological timelines) produce different patterns of ethical selectivity. Additionally, cross-cultural research could explore how proximity, identity, and algorithmic visibility interact in non-Western contexts. Qualitative studies might investigate how individuals themselves perceive and manage the tension between awareness and inaction.

6.3 Normative Implications

The findings of this article have implications beyond academic analysis. If ethical response is structurally constrained by attention limits and platform design, then individual moral exhortations (“pay more attention,” “care more”) are unlikely to be sufficient. Instead, interventions should target the structural conditions that shape attention. Platform designers could consider features that support sustained attention—such as “slow modes,” temporal restrictions on content flow, or interfaces that facilitate deep reading rather than rapid scrolling.

Media literacy programs might shift their focus from content verification to attention management, teaching users how to protect focus and resist algorithmic redirection. Policy discussions could address the attention economy as a matter of public concern, exploring regulations that limit manipulative design practices. These implications, while preliminary, suggest that rethinking morality in the digital age requires not only philosophical reflection but also institutional and technological redesign.

6.4 Final Remarks

Ultimately, this study shows that processes often interpreted as a decline of ethical response in the digital age are better understood as outcomes shaped by structural limits related to attention, temporality, and mediated encounters. The issue is not the absence of ethical sensitivity but the conditions under which it becomes possible. This perspective shifts discussions of morality beyond normative expectations and toward an analysis of the concrete conditions of ethical life. Ethical response does not disappear; rather, it is redistributed, redirected, and constrained within the structural dynamics of visibility, attention, and digital mediation.

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