

Information Systems Ethics: New Species of Old Moral Issues

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Abstract:

While there is a debate on whether the issue raised by IT are unique or simply the same old ethical issues that have plagued society for centuries, these are issues raised as new species of old moral issues. Experts in the field agree that in order to develop the moral and ethical focus in society with regards to information systems ethics, self-binding rules and code of conducts are needed.

Keywords: Digitalization, Digital Ethics, Ethics, Information Systems, Morals, Species

1. Introduction:

Since the invention of the electronic computer in the late 1940's, an increasing number of people have been involved in computer related activities. Today, information systems executives, systems analysts, database administrators, telecommunications specialists have joined to form a huge group collectively referred to as computer professionals. (Oz, 1993). As far back as the second half of the last century computer scientists, such as Norbert Wiener and Joseph Weizenbaum, called public's attention to the ethical challenges immanent in computer technology that can be compared in their societal relevance to the ambivalent promises of nuclear energy. (Capurro, 2009, p 1)

The last four decades has witnessed an explosion in information technology (IT). Unfortunately, scholars, professionals and students have not made similar progress in their ethical reasoning about technology. According to Laudon (1995, p.13), "There is an ethical vacuum in cyberspace." However, the need for ethical behavior among computer professionals and other users of information technology was already recognized as the use of computers rapidly spread in both academics and business organizations.

As there were no laws to address ethical issues in the profession, professional organizations stepped in with their own ethical codes of conduct. However, these codes have not kept pace with today's technology and the opportunities for misconduct it presents.

Articles on business ethics (or lack of) stare us in the face in newspapers, magazines, and television stories. Even computer publications have joined the fray (Athey, 1993). In October 1991, the Executive Report in Computerworld was entitled "IS Ethics: The Ethics Gap" (Rifkin, 1991). Among several points made were that ethics is not discussed on most information systems groups and that the current corporate codes of conduct have failed to keep pace with today's technology and the opportunities for misconduct it opens up. Spafford stated that "technology has developed so rapidly that the target is not well-defined" (Rifkin, 1991).

In 1977, the National Science Foundation sponsored a workshop in Computer Science and technology ethics where participants developed scenarios to promote discussions about ethics in a rapidly growing high technology field. Ten years later, they repeated this same workshop with many of the same scenarios. The

purpose of the 1987 workshop was to further develop the concepts of ethical and unethical practices that are unique or pervasive in the field of computer science and technology while equally including the business community (Parker et al., 1990).

2. Digital Ethics:

The subject of ethics can be defined as “the study of what constitutes good and bad human conduct, including related action and values (Grove, 1976, p210), as “What we value in the realms of human conduct”(Barry,1982, p.5)or as “What is both legally and morally acceptable to the larger community”(Jones,1991). There has never been a clear-cut definition of what is ethical or unethical behavior, mainly because what might be seen as ethical to someone might be perceived as unethical to another. According to Taylor (1975), ethics is an inquiry into the nature and grounds of morality where the morality is taken to mean moral judgments, standards, and rules of conduct. As a result, a number of computer ethics researchers, for example, Johnson (1994) and Kling (1996) both suggest that ethics research should be undertaken on the basis of moral philosophies. The authors write that the moral philosophy perspective can provide more formal and systematic frameworks for determining the ethical appropriateness of individuals’ behavior. A review of normative ethical theories or moral philosophies results in two broad categories. They include: the deontological (or rule-based) theories and teleological (or consequential) theories.

Deontological theories assume that a set of universal rules define what is right. These rules serve as “means” and guidelines for behaviors. These rules may be based on religious beliefs, intuition, or aesthetic beliefs. (Thong and Yap 1998). Fundamental to deontological theories is the inherent rightness of the behavior. Actions or an individual behavior in accordance with personal duty that disregards the ultimate worth of any other person is considered to be wrong.

Teleological theories of ethics on the other hand, address the rightness or wrongness of an action on the basis of its consequences. One aspect of this theory is utilitarianism, which emphasizes creating the maximum benefits for the largest number of people, while at the same time incurring the least amount of damage. A second aspect of teleological theories is egoism, which emphasizes self only benefit. In this case a behavior is considered ethical for an individual only if the outcome or consequences of the behavior or action for the individual are more favorable than the consequences of other actions. “The egoist is an opportunist who will use manipulation to promote self-interest”. (Thong and Yap 1998).

As is often the case in information systems (IS), theories need to be borrowed from other disciplines. Ethical decision making incorporating moral philosophies is a topic of great interest in the literature on business ethics. However, review of the literature indicates that most of the existing studies tend to be non-empirical (Ford and Richardson 1994; Randall and Gibson 1990). Even in the general ethics literature, there are limited studies based on theory testing (Jones 1991).

Recent decades have witnessed a growing awareness of ethical issues relating to information systems management among both professionals and academics. The debates in academic, industry and the broader society have risen since the Internet, Capurro (2009). He went on to define digital ethics or information ethics in a narrower sense as “dealing with the impact of digital ICT on society and the environment at large as well as with ethical questions dealing with the Internet digital information and communication media (digital media ethics) in particular”. This rise in awareness is due, at least in part, to the scandals and negative publicities that have plagued businesses and government in recent decades, and also because of information technology’s place in society today. According to Thong and Yap (1998), Information Technology (IT) is arguably the most important technology in this century. It has the potential to permeate all of society. The use of this technology in society is creating a unique set of ethical issues that requires the resolution of moral choices on the part of society. An ethical issue arises whenever a party in pursuit of its goals engages in behavior that affects the ability of another party to pursue its goal.

3. New Species of Old Moral Issues:

While there is a debate on whether the issue raised by IT are unique or simply the same old ethical issues that have plagued society for centuries, Johnson (1994) writes, that these are issues raised as new species of old moral issues. The metaphor of species and genus includes elements of truth on both sides of the debate, because a new species has some unique characteristics that make it different from other species, while the species also has fundamental characteristics common to all members of the genus (Thong and Yap 1998). Johnson (1994) writes, IT ethical issues have some unique characteristics, yet do not constitute a new set of issues. For example, threats to intellectual property rights have not quite existed in the form that they do today, but property rights have been around for centuries. Forester and Morrison (1994) state that whereas legal systems and concepts such as copyrights, patents, and trade secrets surrounding tangible creations and original authorship (i.e., literary expression) have stabilized in recent decades, the issue of software piracy is shrouded in uncertainty. The author's state that computer software does not fit within the definition of property since it is separate from the medium upon which it is stored that is, it is intangible and it does not need to be removed from the owner's possession to be useful to someone else. Some inherent characteristics of computer software, (i.e., compactness, plasticity, ease of replication, ease of transmission, and multiple uses), provide a new twist to whole issue of ethics and make new legislation difficult to specify. Because of IT's special characteristics, ethical issues involving IT pose a much greater challenge. The 2000 dot com bubble and the global financial and economic crisis of catastrophic proportion in 2008 are instances that remind us all, of what was a lack of moral and ethical responsibility of politicians, bankers and financial institutions. Information technology has enabled what I call the "digitalization of economic systems". According to Capurro (2009), "Digital capitalism was and is still able to bypass national and international law, control and monitoring institutions and mechanisms as well as codes of practice and good governance leading to a global crisis of trust not only within the system but with regard to the system itself".

Experts in the field agree that in order to develop the moral and ethical focus in society with regards to information systems ethics, self-binding rules and code of conducts are needed. For a start, academic research in digital ethics should become one of the main focus of business and economic program of studies in institutions of higher learning.

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