

AJIS FEATURED THEME:
ETHICS IN INFORMATION SYSTEMS

Theme Editor:

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“The computer is now central to society. Its attendant ethical issues are pervasive, complex and important. In response, at systems development level, new software engineering codes of ethics are being developed, for example, by IEEE together with ACM in the USA. Even so, workplace computer systems can result in job loss, de-skilling, and employee monitoring and surveillance. New problems of intellectual property arise with digital storage and transmission of information. The ease of collecting, storing, retrieving and transmitting information challenges the human right to privacy. The Internet raises issues regarding social interaction, censorship and standards of conduct. Who can or should control the Internet? The Internet is global, yet who is setting global standards? Does the USA dominate the Internet? If that is cultural imperialism, does it matter? Electronic commerce and electronic advertising raise ethical questions of privacy and security. Computers are used for crimes, and for their prevention and detection. When does privacy become more important than the prevention and detection of crime?”

The previous paragraph was written by Professor John Weckert, Charles Sturt University, Australia in his foundation paper for the development of the Australian Institute of Computer Ethics (AiCE) in 1998. AiCE was set up to research these key issues and the way that they are impacting Australia and the rest of the world. In order to promote their activities, AiCE has organised a number of conferences around Australia focusing upon Computer Ethics and its impact upon Australia. The AiCE2005 (Geelong) conference follows on from the highly successful initial AiCEC99 (Melbourne), AiCE2000 (Canberra), AiCE2002 (Sydney) and AiCE2005 (Geelong).

The special edition focused upon two key areas, the impact of Computer Ethics upon business and the role of Computer Ethics impacting upon the use of technology. The paper by Bowern et al, entitled “ICT Integrity: Bringing The ACS Code Of Ethics Up To Date”, discusses how the Australian Computer Society code of ethics should be developed for the future to meet the needs of its members. The paper by Pye and Warren entitled “Striking a Balance Between Ethics and ICT Governance” discusses the inter-relationships between Computer Ethics and ICT Governance and the way in which they could be implemented. Following this the paper by John Barlow entitled “Computer simulations, disclosure and duty of care” discusses the way in simulations should be used in an ethical manner, especially in the realm of teaching and the final paper by Pierce et al entitled “Penetration Testing Professional Ethics: A Conceptual Model” discusses the key role of ethics in security testing and the blurred line between right and wrong.

Professor John Weckert, Charles Sturt University, Australia recent research into the future issues of Computers Ethics focuses upon three major aspects problem areas, methodology, and its interdisciplinary nature. First, the problems of growing concern relate to computer networks, and in

particular to the Internet. The issue of privacy will become even more important because of the technology's ability to gather, store, match and make inferences from data and information. This has undoubted benefits but also serious costs in terms of loss of individual privacy and possibly autonomy. Regulation of the Internet will require much more careful examination as that medium plays a larger role in communication, entertainment, business and so on. In both of these cases there will need to be closer examination of the kinds of privacy that deserve protection and what kind of regulation is justified. General claims that individual privacy should be protected at all costs and that there should be no Internet content regulation in any circumstances just will not do. In addition, more effort must be spent on considering how we want computer technology to be used. On the one hand, it should make life easier for all, and not just for a favoured few. On the other, how much easier do we want our lives to be? Life cannot be satisfying without challenges. Global ethics will also become more important. We will need to work harder at finding what is common between cultures, and then build on those commonalities.

Second, computer ethics must become more rigorous and develop a stronger theoretical base. Simultaneously there must be close liaison between theoreticians and practitioners. Computer ethics without theory is mere consciousness raising, useful, but not enough on its own. Theoretical studies remote from professional practice can be mere intellectual exercise, again useful, but insufficient alone. If computer ethics is to be taken seriously there must be a rigorous and theoretically sound examination of practical problems, and it must propose answers within the parameters of the available technology.

Third, a number of disciplines must cooperate to a greater extent if thoroughly analysed and practical answers are to be provided. At a minimum, computing professionals and academics, philosophers, psychologists, sociologists and lawyers are required. An examination of these three aspects will give some guidance to the directions that computer ethics ought to take.

These future ethical issues are the ones that AiCE and Australia will have to deal with to ensure that the impact of technology does not become a nightmare.