

Chapter XXIX

Ethical Issues in Digital Information Technology

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ABSTRACT

Since the inception of the Internet in the late 1960's, technological advances in the field of Information Communications Technology (ICT) have created an ever-expanding digital arena for the development of human innovation, education, expression, communication, and interaction. However, the creation and use of this vast network of knowledge, whether it is for educational, commercial, entertainment, or creative purposes, has also produced its own set of ethical challenges. This chapter discusses the ethical implications associated with the topics of veracity, identity and ownership and the impact of these fundamental ethical issues on human behaviour in emerging digital technologies.

INTRODUCTION

Privacy and security, in relation to either the digital or the more traditional physical worlds, are fundamental issues for physical and mental well being. In the digital arena these issues have always been of great importance to government organizations, financial and commercial institutions. The topic of trust has become the focus of

renewed attention in organizational theory and research (Knights et al., 2001). But with increasing reports of identity theft, internet banking fraud, illegal pirating, and a multitude of money making schemes, the questions of exactly who or what organization we are interacting with (identity), the truth, and reliability of the information that is being provided (veracity) and who has the right to the ownership of that information are

questions that each individual user has the right to have answered.

In this chapter, the terms digital environment or digital arena are used to cover those technologies that include all aspects of Information Communications Technology for example, networked computers, hypertext and hypermedia and the Internet or World Wide Web, which in turn embody many different applications.

IDENTITY

Establishing an Internet Identity

Many philosophers and authors have long argued that the advances in digital technology can be an opportunity for mankind to avoid the inequalities and problems of the more traditional material world. A report by the United Nations (2000) supports the view that any group or society exposed to the digital environment undergoes a leveling of the existing hierarchies of authority. But research has also shown that typically the traits and characteristics of human nature can be reflected in the behaviour patterns which we see and experience in the digital environment (Morgan & Morgan, 2000). This is further supported by a recent survey examining the accuracy of personality impressions based on personal websites, a medium for self expression where identity claims are predominant (Vazire & Gosling, 2004). The observers in this study surveyed a number of websites and rated the Web site authors personality based on the information contained there and these ratings were then compared with both an accuracy criterion and the authors' ideal-self rating. The findings suggest that the identity claims were used to convey valid information about personality. This leads naturally to the question is cyberspace therefore simply a powerful means of reaffirming pre-established Physical-Reality identities or a medium that encourages the creation of Virtual-Reality personae (Romero, 2003)?

Research has also been carried out into the social implications created by the Internet and how it has affected contemporary culture and identity (Wood & Smith, 2001). Chat rooms provide an ideal environment for research into online identity and are a focus of activity for a huge cross section of society who use ICT's. For instance, they can be perceived by teens as a safer environment for exploring emerging sexuality than the real world, where they can develop creative strategies to exchange identity information with their peers, enabling them to pair off with partners of their choice despite the disembodied nature of the interaction (Subrahmanyam, et al., 2004). Other studies show that such anonymous interaction can act as a foundation for establishing real world relationships rather than the creation of fantasy personalities (Hardey, 2002) and that it is possible to develop trust from mutual self-disclosure in online friendships (Henderson & Gilding, 2004).

The internet also represents a huge new step in interpersonal communications for people with disabilities, providing a level ground where all can be equal as we have referred to previously. But if this leveling is occurring because impairment is invisible online, how will disabled people manage disability disclosure within this social context? (Bowker & Tuffin, 2002). Are they using the digital arena to develop friendships, enhance their self-identity, and social being, or are they simply using the Internet as they would use a telephone or a letter (Seymour & Lupton, 2004)? For people suffering from psychiatric disturbances, the private chat rooms and virtual communities of the Internet provide a degree of patient autonomy and operate outside the scope of medical, sociological, or psychiatric practitioners. But the interactions within these domains may themselves be the breeding ground for a new kind of identity disturbance, a powerful new force in the 'manufacture of madness' (Charland, 2004). When a user is unclear about what is real and

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