

Chapter I

Revisiting Mason: The Last 18 Years and Onward

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Abstract

Richard Mason's seminal paper describing the four ethical issues of the information age has guided the field of Information Ethics for almost 20 years. However, much has changed with regard to information technology since 1986, and perhaps Mason's four ethical issues — Privacy, Accuracy, Property, and Accessibility — have become dated. To set the stage for the following chapters, and to provide the reader with some context, this chapter takes a retrospective look at Mason's issues and discusses how they remain salient in today's information-rich and technology-driven society. Additional issues that have emerged since Mason's publication are also discussed, with a discussion of "justified" hacking as a focused and critical analysis of Mason's four issues. While no firm conclusions are reached regarding the ethics of specific actions, the chapter reinforces the

continued use of the four ethical issues in future research, and it prepares the reader for the more detailed discussions that follow in the remaining chapters.

Introduction

Ethicist Richard Mason's 1986 paper, "Four Ethical Issues of the Information Age," was a landmark in the development of ethics research in the Management Information Systems (MIS) field, and has served as a guide for both researchers and practitioners for almost 20 years. However, much has changed since Mason's seminal work was first published. Computing power has increased at the speed predicted by Moore's Law (Moore, 1965), the Soviet Union has been replaced by terrorists as the main perceived threat to the Western world, and the dot.com boom has come and gone. The Internet has transformed the way people communicate, and wireless technologies promise constant connection from almost any point on Earth. Illegal file sharing clogs computer networks, viruses and worms pose a constant threat to PCs everywhere, and terrorism has raised questions regarding the balance of privacy versus security. Perhaps the only constant in the technology arena of the past twenty years is the virtual monopoly dominance by Microsoft of the PC operating system market.

The rapid pace of technology's advancement presents great challenges to those interested in its ethical use. There is little time to discuss the impact of a new technology prior to its implementation, and once a new system is in place, there is little chance of its use being limited. As the saying goes, if someone *can* do something, he probably will. Therefore, it is critical that both the public as a whole and those in the technology field do not become complacent when it comes to discussing the ethical consequences of technology's use. While computers can improve our lives greatly, there is the possibility of unintended harm if they are not used in a manner consistent with society's norms.

As an introduction to the more detailed works presented in this book, this chapter uses Mason's framework to provide the reader with an overview of the increasingly important field of Information Ethics, focusing specifically on the areas of privacy and property rights, which are the main subjects of this book. Issues that Mason could not have foreseen are then discussed, with the concept of "justified" hacking receiving some detailed analysis in light of Mason's four ethical issues. Despite the technological advancements of the past 20 years,

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