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Ethics and ICT: Why all the fuss?

Ethics and
ICT

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to introduce a special section based on papers from Australasian Conference for Information Systems 2014.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper comments on key contextualisation moments in relevant history.

Findings – This paper describes the initiative in Australia to widen Information and Communication Technology ethics awareness.

Originality/value – This is a new attempt to bring Ethics and Information Systems academics closer together.

Keywords ETHICOMP, AiCES, ICT ethics

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

Almost 250 years ago[1], a famous philosopher once said: [...] ordinary human reason [...] knows well how to distinguish what is good, what is bad [...] neither science[2] nor philosophy is needed to know what one has to do to be honest and good, and even wise and virtuous.

Almost 50 years ago[3], two studies examined the effect on privacy of new-fangled technology called computers. They were worried about the increasing use of computers for record-keeping.

And 20 years ago (1995), two concerned academics thought that not enough had been done, since 1972, by academic Information Systems (IS) researchers, about the emerging ethical problems in the field of information and technology. Simon Rogerson and Terry Bynum started ETHICOMP, a conference designed to get more academics involved in solving these problems.

If Kant was right, why was the second necessary and the third created? Well, it turns out that it is not straightforward for the technologically literate, never mind the ordinary person, to be able to work out the ethical problems that arise when using this new-fangled technology. Sometimes the problems are out in the open, but with modern computers that have become part of the fabric of society, they become unnoticed. Hence, the start of computer ethics by those paying attention. But even this is not enough.

In ongoing research by one of us it is clear that, while the ETHICOMP series[4] is a vital and necessary part of bringing awareness of the ethical problems of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to light, there is little in the way of transfer between the specialist computer ethics researchers and the wider IS field. On the whole, very few researchers have feet in both camps. Equally, very few articles from the best



computer ethics journals are cited in the Association of Information Systems (AIS) basket of eight journals; by mainstream information researchers.

Computer ethics researchers are doing good research but is the message getting out? Out to the wider field of information researchers? Out to society at large? We do not think so.

Fast forward to today. The Australasian Conference for Information Systems (ACIS) 2014 conference program stream, Information Ethics and Society[5], is the latest in the efforts of researchers to understand and explain the importance of considering ethics in the development and use of ICT. We think that this is an important step, one that deserves a wider audience than just those who attend ACIS conferences.

The Australian context

The Australian Institute of Computer Ethics (AiCE) was setup in 1998 to undertake research and provide teaching, consultancy and advice to individuals, communities, organisations and governments at local, national and international levels regarding the actual and potential impacts of computing and related technologies on society and its citizens. It is concerned with values and social responsibilities, with computing and professional responsibilities.

The first AiCE conference was held in 1999 at the Lilydale Campus of Swinburne Univeristy in Melbourne. There then followed a series of conferences[6] across Australia:

- 2000 – Canberra (Univeristy of Canberra);
- 2002 – Sydney (Australian Catholic University);
- 2005 – Geelong (Deakin Univeristy);
- 2008 – Melbourne (Deakin Univeristy);
- 2012 – Melbourne (Deakin University); and
- 2013 – Melbourne [RMIT (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology)].

After the 2012 AiCE conference, the organisers thought about the future direction of the conference. One of the interesting aspects of the AiCE conference was the strong support from the IS discipline within Australia and the organising committee felt that the AiCE conference should align the conference with the key regional IS conference, ACIS. The AiCE conference organisers spoke to the organisers of the 24th ACIS conference to see if there was the possibility of aligning the conferences. So in 2013, the AiCE 2013 conference was held at the same time and location at the 24th ACIS Conference and was hosted by RMIT in Melbourne Australia. The 2013 AiCE conference was so popular with the ACIS attendees that the AiCE organising committee approached the organisers of the 25th ACIS conference to include a computer ethics stream in the 25th ACIS conference being run in December 2014, Auckland, New Zealand, by the Auckland Univeristy of Technology. The 25th ACIS conference organisers agreed to the AiCE request.

The 25th ACIS conference advertised their call for papers including the computer ethics stream. There were over 40 paper submissions, but because of conference paper restrictions, only six papers could be accepted for the two sessions that made up the stream. The streams were very popular with attendees and a paper from the stream was awarded the best paper for the entire 25th ACIS conference. The success of the 25th ACIS resulted in a request from the organisers of the 26th ACIS conference to organise a computer ethics stream in the 26th ACIS conference being run in December 2015, Adelaide, South Australia, by UNISA (Univeristy of South Australia).

Aside from the research, the policy aspects of AiCE was taken on board by the Australian Computer Society (ACS) and a new sub-committee was formed dealing specially with computer ethics. The ACS is an association for information and communications technology professionals in Australia and has over 22,000 members. The ACS works with government (at the federal and state level) to advice on policy matters relating to ICT. The ACS has a professional code of ethics that each member must adhere to, this code of ethics was redesigned and members of AiCE played a key role in that process. The ACS also defines a common body of knowledge (CBOK) that all universities should teach in their courses and the ACS formally accredits each course every five years. A key area of knowledge in the CBOK is computer ethics, and it is mandatory that every graduate has to be taught about computer ethics in their courses. AiCE members have been very active within the ACS promoting the merits and importance of computer ethics within the current and new CBOKs.

So a policy level, members of AiCE have played a key role within the ACS in developing the computer ethics agenda at a national level.

Conclusion

To conclude, the research aspects of AiCE continues through a number of regular research conferences and conference streams relating to computer ethics held throughout Australia. The policy aspects of AiCE has been taken on board by the ACS, but AiCE members have key roles in the ACS to ensure the future development of policy and curriculum aspects relating to computer ethics.

AiCE applaud ACIS for including a stream for ethics in the 25th ACIS Conference. We commend the following excellent papers for your essential reading on matters of importance in information, ethics and society.

Notes

1. 1785 – Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals, Immanuel Kant.
2. Computer science in our case.
3. A study begun in 1968 and published in 1972. Databanks in a free society; computers, record-keeping, and privacy, Alan Westin and Michael Baker.
4. www.dmu.ac.uk/research/research-faculties-and-institutes/technology/centre-for-computing-and-social-responsibility/ethicomp-series.aspx
5. The first ethics stream in the ACIS conference series.
6. Conference proceedings freely available at the site: <http://auscomputerethics.com/>

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