ETHICS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

The versatility and adaptability of information technology (IT) offer many potential benefits to society, its organisations and its citizens, but there are also associated risks. The social and ethical implications of this technology warrant special attention and have resulted in the creation of information ethics as a discrete area of study. The overall goal of information ethics is to integrate IT and human values in such a way that IT advances and protects human values rather than doing damage to them.

INFORMATION ETHICS ACTIVITY

Work in information ethics has, until recently, been dominated by the USA. In the last two years there has been an increase in activity in Europe due to a number of contributory factors including the European Union's commitment to establishing a European Information Society, several national initiatives promoting information ethics work and the occurrence of several major information systems disasters. There has been similar activity in Australia. There now exists an informal global network of information ethics researchers. Several applied ethics centres include information ethics in their activities, and there are individuals in computer science, information systems, philosophy and other university departments undertaking work in this area. In the UK the formation of the Centre for Computing and Social Responsibility (CCSR), the only UK-based centre of its kind, has provided a focus for information ethics activity. Two years ago CCSR launched the ETHICOMP conference series to provide a forum to debate the social and ethical implications of IT application. ETHICOMP95 was held in March 1995 at De Montfort University, England. In November 1996 ETHICOMP96 was held at the Pontifical University of Salamanca in Madrid, Spain in association with the Complutense University of Madrid, the Research Center on Computing and Society in the USA and CCSR. There were over 300 participants representing 20 countries from six continents including delegates and three speakers from Australia. It is planned to hold the next conference in March 1998 at Erasmus University in the Netherlands. Three papers have been selected from ETHICOMP96 which illustrate some of the issues within information ethics.

PAPERS

In *Ethical Issues in Network System Design* Duncan Langford discusses how the technical design of computer systems might be influenced by ethical issues and how there is often pressure on practitioners to build systems in ways that might be perceived as unethical. He highlights several ethical issues associated with network design and use, and suggests that the technical design cycle should include explicit consideration of ethical issues. One of these networks, the Internet is the largest and most dynamic information system yet devised and consequently has many ethical dilemmas associated with it. The second paper is *Living with the Internet: Ethics in the Noosphere* by Emma Rooksby and Diarmuid Pigott. They argue that it is a misconception to regard the Internet as a network of individuals pursuing self-indulgence, self-expression or self-improvement. Rather it should be thought of as a high level single entity where the focus is on co-operation and community. They suggest that the ethical focus regarding the Internet should involve both value-based ethical norms and a set of explicit rules that delineate injustice and determine which new behaviours are virtuous or otherwise. It is the software systems of the Internet that are used by Daniel Salber in *The Need for an Applied Computer Ethics Handbook* to illustrate the ethical problems software designers encounter when developing systems. He argues that the Internet is just the forerunner of more innovative applications which will have even more inherently difficult ethical issues associated with them. He suggests that there is an urgent need for better ethically educated practitioners and the provision of practical guidance perhaps in the form of an practitioner's ethics handbook in order to prepare for an even more ethically charged IT future.

CONCLUSION

Social and ethical consideration is paramount in realising a democratic and empowering technology such as IT. There is a growing awareness that such consideration must take place and must be explicit in nature. Both the issues to be considered and the manner in which they are considered must be addressed so that effective action occurs leading to ethical sensitivity in IT development and application. It is only then that systems will be socially acceptable by design rather that by accident which is often the case currently.