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Professional Ethics in Information Systems

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Ethical issues in Information Systems (IS) tend to ebb and flow: at times there is an outpouring of sentiment for or against various practices with considerable debate that may be vitriolic, emotional and pugnacious. After all, it seems to be a universal paradox that each of us can accept all ideas, practices, behaviours and beliefs as expressed by others - except the ones we personally dislike, and we'll fight those with tooth and nail. At other times, the debates and storms abate, perhaps as we lick our wounds, dig holes, erect ramparts and generally get ready for the next round.

The application of professional ethics is made problematic by the fact that accepted norms of behaviour vary widely across cultures, professions and disciplines. The former of these variations is one of the most interesting, as well as the most controversial, since it challenges the viability of truly universal or global ethical principles. In some countries, certain behaviours are certainly frowned upon, but in other cultures similar behaviour may receive approbation. Even within the same culture, attitudes may be polarised - 'Software Piracy' is a good case in point, in that attitudes towards software piracy both within a particular culture and between cultures may vary from strong opposition to strong support.

Identifying truly professional contributions to the research and practitioner literature that engage in rigorous and relevant research in Professional Ethics that go beyond the quotidian is not at all easy. Few articles in addition have the potential to stir controversy and stimulate debate that is both lively and mannered - given the multi-polar nature of ethics: any audience probably has as many poles as members, and often more.

Despite these obstacles, the three articles accepted for this minitrack do exemplify much that is excellent in contemporary IS ethics research in. The first article, by Batya Friedman, Daniel C. Howe and Edward Felten, provides a valuable assessment of the issues associated with data privacy

with respect to the use of cookies by web browsers. The major contribution here involves the inclusion of cookie-management issues in a Value-Sensitive Design redesign of the Mozilla browser. While the work is characterised by the authors as 'work in progress', nevertheless the progress made to date is very worthy of our attention and should exert a considerable impact on web browser design in the future, as well as on the application of Value-Sensitive Design Methodologies in large scale real world software systems.

The second paper, by Bernd Carsten Stahl, involves an entirely different topic: the connection between anthropology, IT and responsibility. Stahl believes that the use (especially commercial use) of IT in general and IS in particular has serious ethical implications, some of which are caused by anthropological views and suppositions. Neglecting these implications endangers the legitimacy, and so use, of these systems.

Our final paper, by Dick Mason, considers the thorny issue of intellectual property and open systems. This is arguably one of the most profound issues encountered in the design and governance of cyberspace.. This paper addresses the critical question of whether cyberspace is to be created as a commons - a space belonging to and used freely by the community as a whole - or, to be partitioned into a multitude of proprietary closed boxes that are owned and sold, distributed, modified, and used only according to the owner's whims.