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IS Research Ethics: Defining Ethical, Barely Ethical and Unethical Behavior

Panel Chair: **Ned Kock**, Temple University

Panelists: **Robert Davison**, City University of Hong Kong
Roger Clarke, Australian National University
Karen Loch, Georgia State University

IS research ethics: What is it and why bother with it?

Even though formal codes of ethical conduct for research exist within the scope of individual research institutions, such as research centers and universities, there is no generally accepted ethical code of research for the field of information systems (IS) as a whole. But, should we be concerned about the lack of an ethical code for IS researchers? Is this really an issue of significant importance for the field?

Our answer is “yes”. We do believe that this issue is of vital importance for the field.

Given the very nature of research endeavors, few things can undermine the credibility of IS researchers and the IS field as badly as behaviors such as plagiarism and data fabrication, behaviors which most people would regard as unethical. The IS field is made up of a large number of IS researchers distributed in many countries around the world, comprising people with often completely different cultural and social backgrounds. Given this, it is only natural that there exist different practices and beliefs as far as what is ethical and what is not in IS research. Furthermore, there may well be significant obstacles to overcome before all can agree upon an ethical code.

Goal and foci of the panel

The goal of this panel is to at least start the discussion about the need for an ethical code for IS researchers. We want to try to shed some light on what is seen by IS researchers as ethical, barely ethical and unethical behavior in the conduct of IS research. We will focus the discussion on three main groups of IS research activities:

- Collection and analysis of research data.
- Writing and submission of research papers.
- Refereeing of submitted research papers.

Examples of provocative questions relevant to these research activities that will be addressed by the panelists and discussed with the audience are provided below. These questions will provide the background on which panelists and audience will try to agree on what is ethical, barely ethical, and unethical in the conduct of the IS research activities above.

Collection and analysis of research data

- Is it ethical to collect research data without the knowledge of all those contributing it? For example, consent to collect case research data at a company is given by management, but employees are unaware that data collection is taking place.
- Is it ethical to offer course credit to students in return for participation in a research experiment, or to claim that such credit was given in a research paper, whereas in practice the students had no choice but to participate?
- Is it ethical to use data analysis methods that are not very well understood, or to use methods that are well understood, but nevertheless inappropriate?
- Is it ethical to use a research methodology that suits the researcher rather than suiting the research questions being investigated?

Writing and submission of research papers

- Is it ethical to submit the same (identical) research paper to a conference and, if published, later to a journal?
- Is it ethical to submit the same paper to different conferences? Does the same apply to journals?
- Is it ethical for someone who has successfully published in top journals to be added as a co-author in papers with colleagues with little publishing experience in return for getting them into a "publishable" format?

Refereeing of submitted research papers

- Is it ethical to accept an invitation to be a reviewer without knowing much (or anything) about the topics covered in a paper?
- Is it ethical to accept an invitation to be a reviewer when there is a conflict of interest? For example, when the author cites the reviewer's work extensively and strongly agrees or disagrees with it.
- Is it ethical to review a paper "blindly" when the identity of the authors is known? For example, when the paper displays sufficient clues for the authorship to be positively attributable.
- Is it ethical to reject a paper because of its underlying epistemology?

Panel discussion

The panel will have two main segments, "*introduction and definition of IS research ethics*" and "*presentations and debate*", both described below.

Introduction and definition of IS research ethics

This segment will start with Ned Kock providing a brief introduction of the panelists and a description of the goals and format of panel. Ned Kock will also briefly describe a Web site that will be created to enrich the panel discussion (see below the section "Panel Web site"). The *presentations and debate* segment of the panel will begin immediately after this.

Presentations and debate

In this segment, three panelists, who all have made important contributions to ethics research in the IS field, will discuss issues related to IS research ethics in ten-minute presentation modules, illustrating their discussion with examples based on their own experiences whenever possible. At the end of each speaker presentation, Ned Kock will invite the audience to provide their opinions and ask questions, which will be answered by the speaker and the other panelists. It is expected that this panel will feature a high level of interaction between audience and panelists, which will be moderated by Ned Kock. The speakers and IS research ethics topics discussed are as follows:

- Robert Davison will list and discuss IS research practices that are ethical, barely ethical, and unethical in the collection and analysis of research data.
- Roger Clarke will list and discuss IS research practices that are ethical, barely ethical, and unethical in the writing and submission of research papers.
- Karen Loch will list and discuss IS research practices that are ethical, barely ethical, and unethical in the refereeing of submitted research papers.

Panel attendees will be given the opportunity to ask questions at any time during or between individual presentations. In the remainder of the allotted time for this panel the panelists will answer questions from the audience.

Panel Web site

Given the complexity and controversial nature of the topic and limited time available at the conference, a Web site will be created to provide additional information and extend this panel discussion beyond the conference. The Web site will be inaugurated approximately two months before the conference, and maintained as an archival resource indefinitely after the conference, as part of ISWorld's Professional Ethics Section:

<http://www.cityu.edu.hk/is/ethics/ethics.htm>

The Web site will contain links to the panelists' personal Web pages, a RealVideo welcome message by the panel chair, a description of the panel, a listing of IS research ethics resources on the Web (including key references of relevance to the panel), and an online discussion forum. The online discussion forum will be open to the public and will receive postings from approximately two months before to two months after the conference, after which it will be kept as an archive.

About the panel members

Ned Kock is a CIGNA Research Fellow in the Fox School of Business and Management, and Assistant Professor in the departments of Management Information Systems and Computer and Information Sciences, Temple University. He holds a PhD in information systems from the University of Waikato, New Zealand. He is the author of three books, including *Process Improvement and Organizational Learning: The Role of Collaboration Technologies* (Idea Group Publishing), and several articles in journals such as *Communications of the ACM*, *Journal of Organizational Computing and Electronic Commerce*, *Information & Management*, *Information Systems Journal*, and *Information Technology & People*. Ned is co-editor of the ISWorld Professional Ethics Section, associate editor of the *Journal of Systems and Information Technology*, and member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Information Technology Cases and Applications*.

Home page: <http://www.cis.temple.edu/~kock/>.

Robert Davison is Assistant Professor in the Department of Information Systems at the City University of Hong Kong. His research interests variously cover: Professional Ethics in Information Systems; Information Systems in Developing Countries; the impact of group support systems on group decision making, learning and communication, particularly in cross-cultural contexts, and informed by interpretive research methods. Robert is co-editor of the IS World sections on Professional Ethics, Global IT, IT in Developing Countries and the Hong Kong country pages. He is also an associate editor of the Electronic Journal of Information Systems in Developing Countries. Robert's work has been published in *Communications of the ACM*, *Communications of the AIS*, *Information Systems Journal*, *Decision Support Systems*, *Group Decision and Negotiation* and *Information & Management*.

Home page: <http://www.cityu.edu.hk/is/staff/rd1.htm>.

Roger Clarke spent a decade as a senior IS academic at the Australian National University, returning to consultancy in 1995. He has particular expertise in electronic commerce, information infrastructure, and privacy and dataveillance; and his work encompasses corporate strategy, government policy and public advocacy. He continues as a Visiting Fellow in the A.N.U.'s Department of Computer Science, and sustains his involvement in postgraduate supervision and in research and publication in refereed outlets. Among his many publications are a number of works on the behavior of IS professionals, and on cyberculture. His publications have appeared in *Communications of the ACM*, *The Information Society*, *IEEE Computer*, the *Journal of Strategic Information Systems*, *Information Technology and People*, and *Database*. He is also founding editor of the ISWORLD Country pages.

Home page: <http://www.anu.edu.au/people/Roger.Clarke/>

Karen D. Loch is Associate Professor and Director of the Institute of International Business in the J. Mack Robinson College of Business at Georgia State University. Her research interests span ethics and IT, international technology transfer, and organizational approaches to knowledge management. She has published in such journals as *MIS Quarterly*, *Communications of the ACM*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Information Systems Journal*, *Academy of Management Executive*, *Journal of Global Information Management*, *Computers & Operations Research*, as well as several pedagogical and popular press journals. Loch is the co-author of *Global Information Technology Education: Issues and Trends* (with M. Khosrowpour, Idea Group Publishing, 1993). She serves as Associate Editor for *Journal of Global Information Technology Management* and Global Associate Editor, Diffusion and Culture for *Journal of Global Information Management*. Loch also serves on the Editorial Board of *Information Resources Management Journal* and regularly reviews for our leading IS journals.

Home page: http://www.cba.gsu.edu/fac_db/displayuser.asp?ref=name&firstname=Karen&lastname=Loch