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J AIS 

Special Issue

## Editors' Introduction

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## Editors' Introduction

This special issue of JAIS is concerned with ethical issues in IS research. The initial call for papers in mid-2008 left some ambiguity about focus of the special issue: was it focused on the ethics of IS research, papers on research *into* IS ethics, discussions on ethics with regard to IS practice, or combinations of two or more of these? We decided to welcome a range of submissions and judge each on its merits. In this way, we felt we might contribute to the growing interest in ethics among the IS community, which was the central theme of ICIS 2008.

Some of the papers submitted addressed important ethical concerns only loosely anchored to IS research: web accessibility, reflective practice, ethical behaviour in virtual settings, teaching ethical issues in IS programs, etc. Others focused on ethical issues in scholarly publication: plagiarism, over-publishing, requirements placed on authors by publishers, etc. We had to make some choices about how to handle such submissions. In the end, submissions related to scholarly publication led in a surprising but useful direction.

Plagiarism is a scourge of the academy, both amongst students and their teachers. Teachers can address the problem with various forms of examination (written and oral) or by technological strategies such as submitting student work to commercial web services such as [turnitin](#). Plagiarism in scholarly publishing is harder to address, and the consequences are often more serious. There is also the practice of self-plagiarism, which is, in turn, related to over-publishing – the practice of submitting highly similar papers to more than one journal. The pressure to publish creates a supply of submitted papers that easily exceeds demand in the form of slots in good journals, so over-publishing can be pernicious. Then there is the curious editorial practice demanding that submitted papers include references (at least five in one instance) to papers previously published in that journal. These kinds of concerns were addressed by Paul Gray in AISWorld, and led to a special issue of Communications of the AIS (Volume 25, 2009).

Our motivation for this special issue was our desire to encourage discussion of and research into ethics in the IS field. We feel that the field is starting from a rather low base. Much of our field's discourse has focused on concern with identity, theory building, and keeping up with rapidly changing business, organizational, and technological circumstances. Ethics can lag behind issues of disciplinary survival and growth. We wanted to give ethics a clear and specific focus that might even survive the current era of upheaval, uncertainty, tight budgets, and so on. Given that there were more good papers submitted than we could publish, we chose three papers that provide a solid base for further discussion.

One paper provides a general overview of ethical IS development, building on Bauman's *Postmodern Ethics*, examining "foundational" thinking in consideration of ethical matters. The second uses Kohlberg's model to assess Hofstede's work on cultural characteristics, examining sub-cultural and inter-generational differences in information ethics. The third uses Kohlberg's model to investigate IT professionals in Japan and China. Each paper points forward, offering one or more instructive devices such as case studies, scenarios, and cultural analysis. The authors stress the complexity of ethical issues and the need to avoid simplification and over-abstraction. All encourage open-minded and pluralistic investigation of ethical issues within IS. These papers met the spirit of the call for papers as our understanding of that call evolved.

Chatterjee, Sarker, and Fuller focus on the moral responsibility of the systems analyst, with implications for research, practice, and the practice of research. They argue that attempts to impose universal principles on IS Development [ISD] are open to problems that accompany other forms of universal knowledge, explaining why so many systems fail or are ineffective. Mainstream ISD methods provide common blueprints applicable to all and every context, often at the expense of serious consideration of profound social or ethical issues. While the work of Mumford, Checkland, and others has considered ethical issues, mainstream approaches to ISD and ISD methods are filled with debilitating ontological and epistemological errors. An amethodological approach that incorporates an explicitly ethical perspective is in keeping with the movement towards agile ISD, but the ethical roles and responsibilities of the analyst require further elaboration.

Martinsons and Ma examine "culture" in IS ethics using data from a survey of more than 1000 Chinese managers, interpreted in light of Mason's model of information ethics and Kohlberg's model based on Piaget's approach to cognitive development. They demonstrate that Hofstede's work, as well as the more recent GLOBE study, suffer by viewing "cultures" as homogenous entities. In their findings, cross-generational factors are more important than traditional culture factors. Their work might, as they admit, "complicate academic research." We believe it encourages researchers to engage "the messiness of the real world."

Davison et al. focus on the ethics of professionals in the IT domain. He criticizes studies of IT professional ethics that rely on undergraduate research subjects, and uses cross-cultural research similar to that of Martinsons and Ma to ascertain whether Kohlberg's model justifies its originator's claims to universality. Davison et al move from an initial focus on IT issues to an exploration of general business ethics, as a basis for their study providing a robust understanding of Kohlberg's work, enhancements to Kohlberg's model, and assessment of its applicability to the IT and general business domains.

These papers demonstrate the "messiness of the real world." They also offer ways to confront this messiness. They avoid the trap of trying to establish universal truths, which might seem counterintuitive given that the subject is ethics. It is easy to assume that a key aim of ethics is to explicate universal ethical principles. But all three papers show that striving for universality contributes more to the problem than to the solution. As Martinson and Ma point out, models that compartmentalize cultures, values, and ethics do not work very well. Davison et al. uphold the scope of Kohlberg's model, noting the volatility and contextuality of ethical codes and behaviours. Chatterjee, Sarker and Fuller find similarities between approaches to IS development and approaches to ethics, noting a move in IS development away from all-encompassing approaches [ISDMs] and toward approaches that are more agile and contingent. This is in keeping with Rorty's insight: ethics has moved from "foundational thinking" to more contingent approaches.

We offer our own perspective on ethics with a close look at Rorty's position. Rorty re-invigorated Pragmatism, pulling back to the foreground work by John Dewey and William James. He aligned himself with Dewey and Nietzsche, stressing the problems of foundational thinking or "first philosophy." He rejected standard distinctions between fact and value, subjective and objective knowledge, ethics and prudence. As he stated in an [interview](#) "I think that what I get out of reading the classical pragmatists is just the idea that there are no privileged descriptions and that therefore there is not much point in asking, 'Is our way of talking about things objective or subjective?' I think of pragmatists as the people who did the best job of getting rid of the subject/object distinction."<sup>1</sup>

Rorty shuns the grand Kantian distinction between morality and everything else. He says, "It's all a matter of solving the problems that arise in relations between human beings. When these problems become acute we call them moral problems, when they don't become acute we call them prudential problems." According to Rorty, "...what Dewey did for moral philosophy was to help get rid of Kant." This implies that 'ethics' is not a separate compartment that one opens in special circumstances. Rather, ethics encompasses all forms of problem solving; all purposeful activities are instrumental and, thus, involve values. This includes activities that appear to be the purely technical, purely economic, purely organizational, social, or political. Under this construction, all features of IS practice and research should be seen as a continuing dialogue involving ethics, and not merely as "solution-oriented" endeavours.

We believe that Rorty's position explains why the IS field needs a sustained discussion on ethical issues. Sometimes this discussion might be more momentous and urgent than other times, but that realization too often occurs in hindsight. It is better to keep the ethical fires burning all the time. Moreover, if there are no universally applicable, valid-for-all-time, ethical principles to invoke at any given moment, we should be more pragmatic in our ethics. No class of problems or actions is exempt

<sup>1</sup> This interview is available [on-line](#), but was originally published in the October/November issue of the magazine *Philosophy Now* 2003.

from ethical considerations. Ethical issues need not hold centre stage at all times, but the place for them is ever-present. This is well understood in professional practice in health care; how different is the professional practice of IS? Indeed, information systems are increasingly bound up with most aspects of daily existence: security, safety, health, financial activity. IS research and practice should grow beyond narrow technical issues to encompass power, inequality, security, and other ethical factors.

Why, then, would any reasonable person ask, "Why discuss ethics in the context of IS research?" There has understandably been an ongoing and sometimes overwhelming concern with technical and business-oriented issues. As Berthold Brecht put it, "Grub first; then ethics": Or as Mark Twain put it; "Principles have no real force except when one is well fed." IS practice might well put technology first, ahead of ethics, thereby postponing concern over principles until the systems are up and running. In a way, practice can be let off the hook a bit for being overly-pragmatic. There is little dispensation for IS research, however. The field's recent upsurge in attention to ethical issues is perhaps an indication that the IS research community is maturing. This interest is welcome, and should be sustained. The current economic meltdown is likely to be accompanied by renewed stress on the bottom line. At times like these, ethics is even more important.

This Special Issue of JAIS is a call for continued engagement with ethical matters in IS practice and research. We hope some in our community will wrestle with relevant ethical debates, contrasting or reconciling the deontological (a focus on duties and rules, assuming that the Right has priority over the Good) and the consequential (a focus on actions and consequences, assuming the Good has priority over the Right); remembering that these debates take place in the context of a messy world in which consequences cannot always be predicted, and duties and rules can be ambiguous and subject to interpretation. Moreover, the rights of the outliers in any distribution cannot be assumed to be of less importance than those who conform to the norm. Others might investigate the ways in which virtue ethics (focus on moral character) can guide professional practice and research agendas. The IS field should take its lead from mature, practice-based disciplines such as medicine or nursing that confront ethical issues and dilemmas in all circumstances.

We acknowledge that the IS field has long had a tradition of ethical consideration, found clearly in work by Churchman, Mumford, Checkland, and others. The question is not whether it has been there, but whether it is enough. We think not. The field should revisit the ways in which we consider research proposals and paper submissions, asking whether they show evidence of clear ethical reasoning. The stakes are high. Vast sums have been poured into IS projects that proved to be abject failures, or at best over-priced, given their impact. In other cases IS projects have been "successful" at the cost of exacerbating social problems in areas such as privacy. The current economic crisis provides a good opportunity to question the role played by IS in problems of the global financial system. IS practitioners and researchers should face up to the ethical aspects of their practices and priorities with responsibility, probity, and integrity. We should challenge and surpass the traditional demarcations between research and application; fact and value; prudence and ethics. As Rorty might have put it, we should move beyond cant.

## About the Authors

**Antony Bryant** is currently Professor of Informatics at Leeds Metropolitan University, Leeds, UK. His initial studies and his PhD were in the social and political sciences. He later completed a Masters in Computing, followed by a period working as a Systems Analyst and Project Leader for a commercial software developer. He has written extensively on research methods, being Senior Editor of The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory (SAGE, 2007) – co-edited with Kathy Charmaz with whom he has worked extensively within the area of Grounded Theory and research methods in general. He has developed and taught a wide range of post-graduate courses in South Africa, Malaysia, and China. He is currently ASEM Professor at the University of Malaya, and Visiting Professor at the University of Amsterdam. His current research includes investigation of the ways in which the Open Source model might be developed as a feature of the re-constructed financial sector in the wake of the economic melt-down.

**Frank F. Land** received his BsC (Econ) degree from the London School of Economics in 1950. After work as a research assistant in the Economics Research Division, he started a career in computing with J. Lyons, in 1953, working on the pioneering LEO Computer first as a programmer and then as a systems analyst. In 1967 he left industry to join the London School of Economics on National Computing Centre grant to establish teaching and research in systems analysis. In 1982 he was promoted to Professor of Systems Analysis. In 1996 he joined the London Business School as Professor of Information Management. He retired in 1991 and was appointed Emeritus Professor at the LSE in the Department of Information Systems in 2000. Frank Land has been Visiting Professor at the Wharton School, the University of Sydney, the University of Cairo, Bond University, Curtin University, and Leeds Metropolitan University. He is past chairman of IFIP WG 8.2 and on the editorial board of a number of academic journals, including acting as Senior Editor for JAIS and Journal of Information Technology and Information and Management. He is a Fellow of the British Computer Society and was awarded a Fellowship of the AIS in 2001 and received its LEO Award in 2003.

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