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A Collaborative Approach to Improving Information Ethics Education

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Abstract

Information professionals manage, organize, preserve, create, design, implement, and control the information systems, services, goods, and devices that are both ubiquitous in and essential to our daily existence. But where there is great power, there is also great responsibility. Recent events suggest that information professionals may benefit from enhanced education and training to prepare them to respond to the ethical challenges they will encounter in their work in socially responsible ways. Improving information ethics education is one step toward beginning to build a strong foundation in this space moving forward. Participants in this workshop will explore and identify key principles, tensions, and themes in the emerging field of information ethics and collaborate on the creation of an open model course syllabus.

Keywords: information ethics, professional responsibility, information policy, education

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1 Introduction

In 1821, Shelley called poets the “unacknowledged legislators of the world. (Shelley, 1890) More recently, this sentiment has been used to describe technologists (Duguid, 2014) but it could just as aptly apply to information professionals more generally.

Information professionals legislate the world by managing, organizing, preserving, creating, designing, implementing, and controlling the information systems, services, goods, and devices that are both ubiquitous in and essential to our daily existence. But where there is great power, there is also great responsibility. Recent media reports of security breaches, suspect record management practices, surreptitious user manipulation, and other questionable practices highlight an unmet need for greater preparation and support of information professionals as they navigate complex ethical issues implicit in much of their work. Improving information ethics education is one way to begin building a strong and supportive foundation necessary for successfully navigating this space moving forward.

While a growing number of iSchools include ethics education in their course offerings, there are significant disparities in terms of the quality, degree, and type of education provided. Existing courses tend to offer specialized perspectives that draw upon the rich ethics literature of related fields: library science; (Hauptman, 1988) computer science; (Woodbury, 2010) law; (Boyle, 1996; Lessig, 1999) communication; (Patterson & Wilkins, 1994; Kiernan, 2002) business; (Floridi, 2009) medicine; (Goodman & Cava, 2008) etc., or established patterns of professional practice and/or formalized codes of conduct: ARMA, ALA, SAA, ISSA, and so forth. While these specialized courses offer tremendous value to their constituents, one might wonder how a more inclusive perspective, embodied in a foundational course organized around an overarching theory of information ethics and bridging the specializations in a coherent way, might also serve the needs of the iSchool community.

A possible explanation for why foundational Information Ethics courses are rare is that there seems to be a scarcity of research providing a comprehensive theoretical perspective and/or synthesis of existing norms, practices, and ethical codes in the information space. (Mingers & Walsham, 2010; Smith & Hasnas, 1999; Koehler & Pemberton, 2000; Floridi, 2002, 2008, 2011, 2013) In fact, one article noted: “whilst the number of ethical quandaries was growing significantly there was somewhat of a theoretical

vacuum as to how to deal with them: "Whether as managers, IS professionals or academic researchers, we ignore these ethical dilemmas and their theoretical assessment at the risk of our own community's credibility." (Mingers & Walsham, 2010, p. 839 citing Smith & Hasnas, 1999, p. 125) An under-developed body of information ethics research may reinforce existing pedagogical gaps. While an ultimate fix for improving iSchool information ethics education must likely account for both facets of the problem: research and teaching, this workshop will only focus only on the latter concern.

iSchools empower students to become the legislators of the world but perhaps do not go far enough to also ensure that they are skilled at recognizing and responding to the ethical dimensions of their work in systematic, principled, critical, and self-reflective ways. This workshop will explore the possibility of creating a foundational course that includes both theoretical and applied ethics components and prepares students to legislate the world in socially responsible ways. By adopting a collaborative approach, this joint effort has the added potential of improving disciplinary consensus and cohesion within the iSchool community and building greater credibility amongst the broader academic, industry, and public spheres.

2 Half or Full day

This workshop is designed as a half-day event.

3 Purpose and Intended Audience

This workshop invites iSchool faculty, students, administrators, and members of industry to discuss, debate, and collaborate on developing solutions to fill the existing gaps in information ethics education.

4 Proposed Format

This half-day workshop will consist of two parts:

- *Part One* will use a roundtable discussion format. Potential participants will be asked to submit a brief (page or less) statement in which they identify and describe a key ethical principle, problem, and/or theme which they believe ought to be covered by iSchool curricula. These statements will provide a jumping off point for plenary group discussion.
- *Part Two* of the workshop will use a small group format of 3-5 individuals per group. Each group will be asked to workshop (i.e. provide feedback on, comment, critique, etc.) a draft model Information Ethics course syllabus provided by the workshop organizer. The small groups will reconvene and a spokesperson from each group will briefly highlight the main points generated by their group.

5 Goals and Outcomes

The goals and outcomes of the roundtable discussion are tri-fold. First, the workshop seeks to raise awareness and build consensus around the need for improved ethics education. Second, it hopes to identify some of the major salient ethical principles, challenges, and themes of relevance to the iSchool community; a brief report summarizing the findings will be made available online. Third, the workshop provides an opportunity to collaborate on the creation and refinement of a model information ethics course syllabus; the draft model syllabus will be made available post-conference for additional review, modification, customization, and adoption.

6 Relevance to the iConference

This workshop will focus on improving information ethics education within the iSchool community by opening discussion, debate, and discourse around information ethics and providing space for practical collaboration on an open model information ethics course syllabus.

7 Expected/Preferred Number of Participants

The preferred number of participants is approximately 25 people. Having discussed the idea of this workshop with faculty from several iSchools, and gotten informal agreement to participate, I anticipate this workshop will attract approximately 15-30 attendees.

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