

e-inclusion Ethics

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**Originally published as ETHcol in the IMIS Journal Volume 17
No 7 (December 2007)**

A recent workshop organised by the European Commission examined the ethical aspects of inclusion in the Information Society. The introduction explained that, "Information and communication technologies (ICT) are advancing rapidly and are changing society profoundly. Such technologies can genuinely empower citizens to play a full role in society, notably those that are at risk of exclusion. Inclusion in the information society, or e-inclusion, aims at using ICT to improve social and economic inclusion. E-inclusion is also concerned with inclusive ICT, i.e. ICT that is accessible, available and affordable for all. However, as the knowledge-based economy develops, the increasing use of leading-edge technologies in all areas of life can also present major challenges for some people and introduce new threats to sustained growth and social inclusion. There is a risk that, despite their many benefits, new technologies could set people apart, create new barriers, and increase exclusion."

These ethical issues were summarised as, "dealing with sensitive problems such as informed consent, right to privacy and protection of personal data, respect for dignity and integrity of the person, non-invasion of the private sphere, equity, intrusiveness (of information technologies), risk and responsibilities for critical technologies. ... [as well as] the use of ICT for social and cultural integration of migrants in their new communities in Europe, ICT for the social inclusion of marginalized young people, and the use of e-government services."

It must be recognised that ethical issues related to ICT are much more than just privacy (albeit this is a very important topic) and that ICT advances will inevitably raise new ethical issues yet to be identified. ICT and human values must be integrated in such a way that ICT advances and protects human values, rather than doing damage to them. This includes both the formulation and justification of policies for the ethical use of ICT and carefully considered, transparent and justified actions leading to ICT outcomes.

This is a daunting and increasing agenda which faces politicians, organisational management as well as ICT professionals. In this age of pervasive ICT, it is not sufficient for ICT professionals to leave the tackling of such sensitive issues to others.

ICT systems are about satisfying a particular requirement or need so that people can realise some economic and/or social objective. In such situations ICT professionals must guard against the design principles where users must adapt to ICT rather than ICT being moulded to users. This is paramount if e-inclusion is to be realised. Ethical design principles must focus on understanding the potential impact on people whose

- behaviour/work process will be affected by the development or delivery of ICT systems; or
- circumstance/job will be affected by the development or delivery of ICT systems; or
- experiences will be affected by the development or delivery of ICT systems.

The ethical dimension of the ICT has two distinct elements; process and product.

Process concerns the activities of ICT professionals when undertaking research, development and service/product delivery. The ethical focus is professional conduct. It is this focus which is typically addressed by professional bodies in their codes such as the Code of Ethics of IMIS. The aim is for professionals to be virtuous. In other words a professional knows that an action is the right thing to do in the circumstances and does it for the right motive. Cutting profit so that more development time can be spent on making systems more accessible to those with limited ability, such as dexterity, seems like a virtuous action if it helps to overcome social exclusion.

Product concerns the outcome of professional ICT endeavour. One of the issues of ICT is to avoid systems being used for inappropriate secondary reasons, for example, a security system which has been implemented to reduce the risk of property theft being used to additionally monitor employee movement. Another issue is the thirst of the ICT industry to add more and more facilities in future system releases. Both issues are illustrations of unwarranted function creep. The emphasis should be on accessibility and transparency of systems so people can use ICT systems more easily and can understand, where necessary, how systems work internally. One final issue regarding product is to do with the increasing use of non-human agents based on complex ICT systems. Such agents might interact with humans, for example, those used on the Internet to enable e-trading, or they might interact with each other, for example agents which monitor the environment and "order" other agents to take remedial action if necessary.

The ethics focus of the product element is technological integrity. This can be addressed by embedding ethics within ICT products themselves. This might be as simple as building in "opt-in" facilities in e-trading whereby a person must ask to be informed of future sales promotions rather than having to request explicitly not to receive such information by default. They might be more complex, for example, whereby a non-human agent is programmed with defined ethical principles so that it will only instigate actions which are deemed to be societally acceptable.

People deserve ICT systems which will help them fulfil their potential and their goals. Systems which fall short of this by design or by accident will have done so because ICT professionals have failed to take the ethical dimension of their work seriously enough. In today's society we are quick to focus on rights and justice because it is on these which our laws, such as data protection and computer misuse, are based. Whilst they are important there can be a tendency for this to turn into mindless and convenient legal

compliance. This will not help e-inclusion whatsoever. Perhaps it is time that ICT professionals adopt care and empathy instead as they grapple with the challenges of ICT process and product.

Please send your views on ethical and social responsibility issues and cases of ethical dilemmas to:

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