GUEST EDITORIAL

Ethics in the virtual world

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this viewpoint paper is to provide an overview of three papers included in a Special Issue of the *Journal of Information Communication Ethics and Society*, entitled *Ethics in the Virtual World*.

Design/methodology/approach – The papers were chosen because they reflect three key themes in computing, ethics and society. These are: the explosion in the number of opportunities for accessing sensitive data in the health sector; the risks inherent in designing information systems through technical procedures that fail to address the human character of the environments they are intended to serve; and the need to teach computing ethics to students of computing. All three articles draw on philosophical approaches to ethics and well as technical aspects of system use, system design and pedagogy, respectively.

Findings – The papers demonstrate the interdisciplinary nature of computing ethics and the contested political issues at stake in using and designing information systems.

Originality/value – This editorial viewpoint paper presents the hypothesis that the ethical issues once embodied in socio-technical systems theory have a particular salience for the contemporary ethical debates concerning computing ethics.

Keywords Ethics, Health services, Information systems

Paper type General review

This special issue is devoted to *Ethics in the Virtual World*. This was the theme selected for the Second International Conference on Teaching Applied and Professional Ethics in Higher Education held at what is now Roehampton University in September 2005. The conference invited papers on ethical issues that arose in computing practice which would need to be addressed in teaching computing ethics. Three papers delivered at the conference have been revised and developed for this issue. They have been chosen because they reflect three major and continuing themes in computing, ethics and society. The first of these is the explosion in the number of opportunities for accessing confidential and sensitive data that are afforded by the digital mediation of data, particularly in the health sector. Making information available to those who can make effective and appropriate use of it also creates abundant opportunities for the abuse of data. Part of the crisis faced by health services in many nations is the inability to manage this delicate balance between protecting data and making it accessible. Richard Cooper explores the ethical issues that arise in extending opportunities to access health records to allied health care professionals such as community pharmacists.

The second theme concerns the risks inherent in designing information systems that draw on technical procedures that fail to address the distinctively human character of the environments these systems are intended to serve. This second article by Lars Botin, draws on a similar context to Richard Cooper’s, that of electronic health care records. But the ethical focus is different in both. Cooper is concerned with the ethics of use of
these systems. Botin is concerned with the ethics of design. Suzy Jagger and I in the third article are concerned with the teaching of professional computing ethics in the undergraduate curriculum and how the outcomes of such teaching are assessed. In examining the significance of the “Defining Issues Test” for such assessment, the importance of articulating the ethical character of what is being assessed is highlighted. Unlike the Botin and Cooper, article, the Jagger and Strain article is not a report of a completed piece of research. It is rather an examination of the ethical issues involved in research in progress. This examination is considered of interest beyond the confines of the particular research project.

Both Botin and Jagger in their different projects bring a phenomenological turn to understanding computing ethics. All three articles report projects that draw on philosophical approaches to ethics and well as system use, system design and pedagogy, respectively.

The three papers stretch across a number of disciplines and reflect the intrinsically interdisciplinary nature of computing ethics. Richard Cooper’s article exposes the contested political issues at stake in making use of information systems. The deregulation of certain medicines allows many proprietary medicines, hitherto available only by prescription, to be freely available by purchase over the counter at pharmacies. But this has generated increased responsibilities for community pharmacists to ensure that the medicines being purchased are fit for purpose and appropriate for the patient. Both might be assessed by asking the patient-customer for information that would allow the assessment to be formed. Alternatively, they might be assessed by the pharmacist accessing the individual’s electronic health care record if these records were made available to the pharmacist. These alternatives draw on different political traditions. Asking the patient or customer for information that might be given, accurately, truthfully or otherwise, draws on the tradition of respect for individual freedoms and a Kantian approach to personal autonomy. Authorising pharmacists to access relevant data from an electronic system draws on a more dirigiste approach to data, reflecting the primacy of the duty of care in advancing patient benefit and well-being and a utilitarian approach to well-being.

Such relationships between the political and ethical principles and access to data are also reflected in the avenues to information upon which patients draw. The promotion of deregulation and the emphasis on putting the patients’ choices first depends on patients having information about the availability and utility of medicines. The internet, with its own particular architecture of access has been a major source of this information. Thus, the internet services a concept of data access that promotes de-regulation and patient autonomy. The healthcare records system services the duty of care to patients.

Different approaches to the structure of information systems support different approaches to human relationships in the social and political context. This is worth remembering in the design of information systems. Botin’s article provides an important case study of how a systematic and logical approach to the design of information systems can significantly misrepresent the lived experiences of those who work in complex organizations such as healthcare. Methods are needed which can describe the rich array of relationships and communication within organizations which are not described in such logical mechanisms as organization charts, these concerns reflect long standing prescriptions for socio-technical approaches to system design and
for ethnographic approaches to capturing requirements for system design that have been familiar to those in the Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) initiative. Indeed, a recent special issue of the CSCW journal is devoted to healthcare systems, (Procter et al., 2006). Botin’s article has a significance in taking us beyond the issues of success and failure in the design of systems and into the ethical domain of the damage done to human relationships in failures through inadequate design. There is within the socio-technical literature an implicit and sometimes explicit concern with ethical issues of design. The earliest studies of Trist and Bamforth (1951) drew on a psychoanalytic approach to organizations (albeit long before the advent of digital information systems) that drew on claims about human well-being that were inescapably ethical. Mumford (1996) drew attention to political as well as ethical concerns in system design, one might wonder if more recent quests in ethnographical approaches to system design have lost sight of these ethical concerns. There would be a particular irony in the ethical potential of socio-technical design to be lost at a time when the public agenda of ethics has rarely been more clear.

All these issues of system use and system design create rich and diverse scenarios which suggest opportunities through which computing students might learn computing ethics. Suzy Jagger has introduced some innovative ways of using debates in teaching ethics in the undergraduate computing curriculum. These debates provide opportunities for students to shape their judgements through interaction with each other in response to ethical dilemmas inherent in scenarios. Jagger is seeking to evaluate how these learning experiences contribute to the formation of a capability for ethical judgement as measured in the defining issues test. But the defining issues test is constrained by a somewhat Kantian view of ethical development. That is to say that the capability for ethical judgement is considered as a progression from the adoption of self-regarding concerns, through the adoption of concerns about how well one’s ethical concerns conform to socially accepted norms, through to the adoption of Kant’s ethical ideal, the categorical imperative of universalisable moral maxims. But there is little scope within the defining issues test for understanding how students might articulate their own accounts of what matters most to them in their ethical judgements. By including such accounts in an action research project scope is created to provide a more nuanced understanding of how people express their ethical development in addition to how Kant and Kohlberg would have it described.

References

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