The academy's deployment of the issue of information ethics

**in 1995-2005/** Haya Steinberg

**Abstract** 

Post-industrialist society has been dubbed the society of information – a term which

specifies a society, in which production, distribution and manipulation of information

are the most significant economic and cultural activities. This is a global and branched

society, whose characteristics are interactivity and decentralization. In addition, this is

a society characterized by a high intensive level of information in the daily life of

most of its members, in most organizations and work-places; by the use of technology

which is joint or suitable to a wide range of personal, social, educational and business

activities; and by the ability to relay, receive and exchange data quickly from place to

place, without considerations of distances.

What stands behind this vast and multi-dimensional change is the tremendous and

accelerated development of information and communication technologies. This

development changes the way we live: the way we work and do business, how we

educate our children, learn and conduct research, train ourselves, and entertain

ourselves.

This development creates globalization – a process of an array of collective financial,

social, technological, cultural and political changes, in which the mutual and

dependent relationships, the integration and interaction between people and societies

from different places are intensified.

In this reality, in which information is the main factor of the utmost importance in

every field of life, and in the face of all the changes it generates through information

and communication technologies, rises a need to re-examine and redefine many issues

and topics in order to be prepared to deal with them in a way beneficial to mankind.

An extremely important topic is information ethics, which, prior to the information

era was dealt with mainly by the discipline of librarianship, while nowadays it deals

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with ethical issues and conflicts that arise from the use of information, information technologies and information systems and is a multibranched topic, which was

adopted and developed by many other disciplines.

In order to prepare to deal with this topic, various organizations have been founded, mainly since the beginning of the 1980's, but even prior to that. Some are public and some private; some are profit organizations and others non-profit; academic and non-

academic.

The objective of this qualitative research is to examine the way academic

organizations deal with the topic of information ethics.

To this end, 15 university organizations were chosen, which deal with the field of information ethics. These organizations constitute a part of the university institution, a faculty or a department, etc., or they belong to/are a product of cooperation between several universities (at least two). The organizations chosen are from various places around the world and belong to the international organization ICIE – International Center for Information Ethics. The ICIE has a website, from which the organizations participating in this research were taken. This is an academic website on the topic of information ethics, which serves as a platform for exchange of information on what is going on in this field around the world. In addition, the website enables meetings and encounters, gives updates on activities of various organizations and is free. the website is hosted by ZKM - Center for Art and Media (Zentrum fur Kunst und Medienttechnologie Karlsruhe), a cultural organization that responds to rapid developments in the field of information technology and to changes in society, and it combines production, research, exhibitions, events, coordination and documentation.

The research hypotheses examined:

1. What are the main topics handled by university institutes, which deal with information ethics: It was found that the organizations deal with many topics from a wide variety of fields, the main ones being: society, globalization, law, designing of virtual space, digital gaps, economics/business, government and politics, academy/research, private, information and communication technologies (ICT) and social information, and professional and implemented ethics. Among these fields, the social field is the most prominent.

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- 2. What are the disciplines of the academic organizations that deal with information ethics: It was found that the disciplines to which they belong are: interdisciplinary, philosophy, librarianship and information science, computers, public policy and management, electronic engineering, international relations and law. The main discipline to which the organizations belong is interdisciplinary: 5 of the 15 organizations.
- 3. Is there a correlation between the organizations' disciplines and the topics with which they deal: It was found that, by-and-large, there is no distinct or exclusive correlation between the organizations' disciplines and the topics with which they deal. Furthermore, these topics often coincide with many other disciplines than those of the organization.
- 4. What will the profile of an academic organization that deals with information ethics look like: The organization profile received summarizes and reflects the main findings arising from the examination of the first three research hypotheses. In general, this is an organization established in the 1990's in the USA, interdisciplinary, its field of practice society, computer information and technology, it deals with research and its main research topics are primarily social. However, it also deals with many additional topics, from a wide variety of fields.

The research was carried out through the examination of the organizations' websites, according to 4 charts:

- a. General data on the organization.
- b. Conferences held by the organization.
- c. Professional newsletters/journals of the organization.
- d. Assessment of the organization's website.

The research results can be summarized as follows:

A prominent and main finding in the academy's preparation for dealing with the topic of information ethics is the interdisciplinary approach, manifested in the results of all the research hypotheses. The fact that information is a central pillar in every field of life raises many ethical dilemmas that pervade a wide range of disciplines and levels. Furthermore, these ethical dilemmas are often tangent to more than one field. Therefore, they must be dealt with from a variety of angles and through various

methods, which will eventually lead to a new system that will enable to understand

them satisfactorily. The use of several academic disciplines and the integration of

their insights in order to deal with the field of information ethics are necessary, and

one cannot do without it, due to its complexity and since its scope is too wide for it to

be dealt with using the knowledge and methodology of only one discipline.

Philosophy, librarianship and information science are also prominent as organization

disciplines that deal with information ethics: 3 of the 15 organizations are from the

field of philosophy. This reflects the need for a new definition and for broadening the

existing definitions regarding the meaning and the range of the concept of ethics in

general and of information ethics specifically; what is information and what are its

metaphysical and epistemological characteristics; what are the relations between

human logic and that of the computer; and what are the social effects of information

technology.

2 of the 15 organizations are from the discipline of "Librarianship and Information

Science". Information ethics developed throughout the years as a field in the

"Librarianship and Information Science" discipline. In the USA, the field of

information ethics began developing in the 1980's, at first in librarianship, and later

became a multi-branched phenomenon, in part stemming from the uniting of many

disciplines around issues connected with the internet.

A phenomenon that often reoccurred when examining the websites was that despite

the fact that in general the website received a good average grade, on the one hand

there is an educated use of digitalized media, but, on the other hand, the use of this

media's possibilities is limited and insufficient. Thus, for example, various

possibilities of interactivity, such as chat-groups and forums and addition of material

by the users, are not widespread on the organizations' websites. These tools may have

assisted in turning the website into a platform for discussion, exchange and discovery

of information on the topic of information ethics.

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