

ETHICS AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE INFORMATION AGE

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Introduction. In the past several decades, extraordinary developments have occurred in the American and global economies. The United States has shifted from a manufacturing society to an information society as major means of wealth production. More people are employed collecting, handling, and distributing information than in any other occupation. Our society is truly an information society, and our time, an information age. At the heart of this information age is the computer.

Purpose. The purpose of this work is to present research findings related to ethics and social responsibility in information technology.

Information Age. Clearly, the United States leads the world in the development of computer systems. For example, 8 of the top 10 applications software vendors, 7 of the top 10 systems software vendors, the top 5 systems integration firms, and 8 of the top 10 custom programming firms are US companies (US International Trade Commission, Service Industries, June 1995, chapter 5, as cited in Landau, S., 2003).

The information age means that we now live in a global economy, characterized by rapid change, accelerated scientific and technological breakthroughs, and an unprecedented level of competitiveness. These developments create demands for higher levels of education and training than were required of previous generations. Mind work replaces physical labor as the dominant employee activity (Branden, 2001).

Active and successful participation in the information age and global economy requires a great amount of ethical values and social responsibility by all involved.

Ethical Values. Four ethical values of IT are Accuracy, Property, Accessibility, and Privacy (Archivist, MIS Quarterly, 1986). Accuracy deals with the authenticity, validity, or dependability of the information, and the accountability for any errors. Property relates to the ownership of information, just prices for exchange, and exchange channels. Accessibility deals with the rights of access and the digital divide. Privacy is about secrecy, intrusion, and surveillance in information technology.

Social Responsibility. The information revolution developments create new psychological demands from us. They ask us to bring a greater capacity for innovation, self-management, and personal responsibility. They also demand social responsibility. Responsibility is the process of ascription, whereby an object is ascribed to a subject. For example, in the statement: X is responsible for the loss, loss is the object ascribed to the subject X.

Responsibility has three elements, the subject, object, and a mediator, who analyzes the communication between the two parties and provides a generally accepted norm. These norms can be social morality, the law, or any other set of rules that the parties can accept, based on their background, culture, religion, and education. Society, particularly, the government, then has to set mechanisms to control spamming, computer virus, reconnaissance, surveillance activities, and other forms of problems created by the information age. Information security mechanisms, such as encryption, can provide some solutions to these problems.

Conclusions. Information technology is the wave of today and the future. Society must adapt to it by creating responsible rules, norms, ethics, and knowledge workers that will enhance its rapid growth.