

UK views on ethical and spiritual implications of IT

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Abstract

The UK Worshipful Company of Information Technologists organised two high-level colloquia to debate ethical & spiritual implication of the new IT & Telecoms Environment in 1997. The colloquia were hosted in the UK House of Lords. This paper summarises the debates of those colloquia, and discusses some of the ethical and cultural issues that arise.

1. Background

This paper summarises points raised from two British meetings of self-selected representatives of professional and Christian groups: the issues raised are important, but have a distinctive British establishment bias. However, the meetings were not intended to provide a comprehensive view of the general public of the UK.

This paper offers these concerns to the wider audience at the international Ethicomp'98 conference. Naturally, these views are neither definitive nor comprehensive. We, the authors of this paper are British, and we are reporting on British views about the impact of information and communications technologies in a world-wide multi-cultural context. Our own concerns may strike others as being insightful, parochial, or just idiosyncratic. Nevertheless, we believe that these issues are of concern to people more generally, and we hope that the issues will be of some wider interest, beyond as well as within the UK, and that this paper will stimulate constructive debate. However, we are acutely aware of the limitations of our approach: Britain itself is a complex, multi-cultural society with many traditions, but the meetings we report did not attempt a representative sample, nor did it intend to — indeed, representation is one of the issues (see below).

The Worshipful Company of Information Technologists, which organised the meetings, is the 100th and newest “City Livery Company” (an institution which goes back to the Mediaeval Guilds). Its aims are directed towards educational and charitable activities, and improving awareness and understanding of the benefits of Information Technology, especially within the City of London. It advances its charitable activities through a number of ‘Panels’ including a ‘Religion and Spiritual Development Panel’ which organised these colloquia. The first colloquium was held on February 10, the second on October 15, 1997. The first colloquium, but not the second, was held under the Chatham House Rule (points made may be freely reported, but no contributors identified without their express permission). Although some subsequent discussion on the Web has been attributed, and the second colloquium was not anonymous, we have edited and uniformly anonymised all contributions. We take responsibility for our editorial presentation.

2. Introduction

Any serious discussion of ethics will produce diversity of comment. Ideas of “good” and “bad,” tightly knitted with ideas of responsibility and justice are intensely personal issues. It is therefore not surprising that the complicated relationships

generated by new technology in the social arena are producing wide-ranging discussions.

In the interests of clarity we have pulled together the main topics of concern and dealt with them under categories relating to a social order. (It is acknowledged there are other possible choices for classification, but as much of the discussion seems to hinge on “the Internet” which has an increasingly social use, this seemed a good place to start.) The categories are hierarchical, beginning with matters related to the personal, or individual level, and continuing through community level, national level, and finally, international level. It should be noted that within these categories the various points discussed are not necessarily in any order of priority of concern. In addition, although the general topic is IT, the participants were, on the whole, concerned with the ethical impact of the Internet, therefore the comments throughout the paper are directed particularly toward those issues.

In addition to raising ethical issues, suggestions were made for initiating steps towards some resolution in the form of regulation. These suggestions have been grouped under the headings of government, church and education, that is, those bodies considered most relevant (because of their resources and/or impact) for the implementation of social behaviour. Self-regulatory measures were also discussed, and are reported here.

The rapid progress of IT, and its equally rapid assimilation into many levels of society, presents a profusion of ethical dilemmas. A useful approach might be to distinguish between old issues in new guises, and specifically new, IT-related issues. We have included a section which proposes that IT has indeed introduced new issues.

The final part of the paper takes an overview of the discussions, and highlights questions arising from them. We also discuss the format of the meetings.

3. Ethical considerations at the individual level

A new form of relationship between the individual and the computer is emerging. The computer is not merely a tool for seeking and exchanging information, but can also be a source of entertainment and social exchange. There is a concern that extended use of the computer in this way could lead to over-emphasis of a virtual world, and to a deficit of physical interaction with the embodied personal world. Two implications from the physical (or “in real life,” IRL) versus virtual were discussed.

The first is that boundaries between ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ can be crossed easily. The virtual world is designed to give one the illusion of reality. An individual who spends a substantial amount of time immersed in the virtual may come to relate more with the ‘virtual’ than with the real. If this happens, as-it-were unconsciously, how does that person fit into our concepts of society and its associated codes of behaviour? On the other hand, if the person prefers to lead an existence within the virtual world, consciously choosing to occupy that environment, to what extent have they excluded themselves from the real world? It could be argued that individuals have the right to choose where they spend their time. However, an existence in a virtual world also de-emphasises the actual physical body. A lack of consideration of the whole human being can lead to a distancing-effect in human interaction, and consideration of the actual impact on human beings of our behaviour can be diminished. Consider, for example, the difference between watching a news report from a war zone and actually being there.

The second point refers to use of the Internet for social exchange and interaction. Again, a concern arises when this becomes the dominant social interaction for a person. The individual does not need to physically mix or congregate with other people, and thus expose themselves to a variety of contexts and opinions — not all of

which they will have chosen or would agree with. A person can now operate in a physically isolated way, searching within a narrowly defined band of information, seeking social interchange only with like-minded people, and opting out of a network of mutual relations and obligations. Apart from encouraging a narrow-minded view of the world, there is a danger that an unrealistic picture of the diversity of the world will be built. For example, someone with an interest in sadism and communicating only with like-minded individuals is likely to develop a very distorted view of acceptable social behaviour.

The theme of “denial of body” links to an associated dilemma — that of anonymity. At a personal level, anonymity can encourage those who lack of confidence to express themselves in a way they would find difficult in traditional-society terms. However, anonymity can also encourage unacceptable behaviour without fear of reprisal, or responsibility. This type of effect can be noticed when comparing small and large communities. In a small community recognition of individuals can be a deterrent to bad behaviour — in a large city it is easier to “get lost in the crowd” and push the boundaries of ethical behaviour. (Vandals in the real world exploit anonymity.) In addition, anonymity can encourage pseudonymy, adopting a false identity to gain access to groups, or for the purposes of deliberately misleading others. This is of particular concern when children are involved, opening the way for paedophiles to use these groups for their own purposes.

Children are using the new technology, and there are of course ethical considerations from a “protection of the innocent” point of view. It was felt that differences in technical ability of parents and children posed a problem of parental supervision. Many children are extremely able with the new technology, far in advance of their parents’ abilities or understanding. Within the context of pornography or extreme violence, it has become easier for children to access unsuitable material. In the physical world pornographic material (magazines, videos) come under clear regulation, and are kept out of reach of children in Britain. On the Internet steps towards parental regulation have been taken in the provision of filtering software, but technically advanced children are able to overcome such attempts. (Technically advanced children, or adults, may well share successful methods with other children, for instance by exchanging programs or data. This would circumvent any direct regulation of children by methods that assume “the problem” is on the Internet rather than on, say, floppies or email with known acquaintances.)

One speaker warned that the new technical bias towards seeing the world in objective terms might lead to “repetitive soul strain.” Also that “any conversation about communication must include some reflection on the meaning of life.”

It was agreed there were tremendous opportunities for children and others to access educational information on the Internet, offering children an exciting means of broadening their world knowledge. However, the question was raised, “has it become too easy to find answers to questions for school work?” Are children losing out on the opportunity to ‘search’ and to ‘think’? Does the new technology encourage a lack of ‘depth’ in thought?

As a related point, behaviour patterns are learned by repetitive reinforcing behaviour. An interactive simulation of an unethical act is far more likely to modify behaviour or inhibitions than simply watching a video or looking at a picture.

This lack of ‘depth’ does not just apply to children. The interaction between person and computer can lead to a state of “domination of the momentary.” That is, an emphasis on the “here and now.” Our human development arguably depends on a broader, more reflective view of the world and our place in it. An awareness of past and future guide our decisions for the present. How can the skills of reflection, planning and reasoning be developed in this type of environment?

4. Community Issues

An important ethical issue arising at the community level was one of access. Technology is relevant to us all, the Internet in particular provides an opportunity for individuals to participate in the benefits of global sharing of information and communication. If ethics has to do with freedom of choice, then it also has to do with opportunity and responsibility.

In order to utilise their freedom of choice people must have the opportunity, and ability, to choose whether to use this technology. Constraints on opportunity of access are, in the UK: financial, computer literacy and physical ability. Geographically-defined communities are in a position to help overcome these constraints by providing public access (libraries, schools, community buildings). At the community level computer literacy and training refers to adults and can be provided by, for example, adult education classes, parent associations in schools, and libraries. The education of children in these skills is referred to in the following section.

Note that some libraries in the UK provide computers linked to the Internet, but only in some cases free of charge. A minster (cathedral-like church) consecrated in the last few months has a cyber-cafe in the church buildings to build Internet skills.

5. National Issues

National educational policies come from Government and are thus discussed under the national domain. Within this area, and linked to the subject of access, lies the issue of “information rich” and “information poor.” Information has a value, not simply financial but also in the sense of power. Lack of information leads to a poverty of choice, and unequal information gives one person an advantage over another.

Concern was expressed that the new technology (which deals primarily in information) could lead to an imbalance within the population, creating a new subclass of underprivileged, that is, the information poor. Those having access to, and holding information are in a position of power over those without. This situation may be alleviated as time goes on by following an educational policy that raises awareness of the importance of computer literacy.

The accessibility of information concerning individuals — made easier by new technology — raises ethical questions regarding privacy. In the UK recent suggestions to introduce identity cards met with hostility and suspicion; moves to collate databases of detailed information about individuals tend to generate a similar reaction. The issue here is one of power, related to the matter of personal identity. The collation of diverse personal information can build a profile of that person — ranging from age and gender, to political stance, and consumer choices. Experience has shown that personal data held on a computer system is prone to error; if that happens a new but specious identity is created for the named person, based on false information.

We all know how difficult it is to correct information held about us on computer systems. Should we be put into the position where we have to? The responsibility apparently becomes ours to ‘prove’ our own identity. The suggestion was put forward that at a national level we must generate a culture which respects the use of personal information. In the UK, there is a Data Protection Registrar who has legal responsibility for supervising the licensing of use of personal information on computers, and who has been strongly pro-active in preventing (for example) utilities from using personal information on their consumers for wider direct marketing purposes without the individuals’ express consent.

Freedom of speech is considered a precious, and integral aspect of our democracy. The ethical dilemma is “how far does freedom of speech go”? Although in theory we are all free to speak our minds, in practice there are constraints when scaled up to large numbers of the population. The press in the UK practises self-regulation, largely driven by public opinion and peer pressure. There are also laws regarding incitement, libel and slander. In courts of law jurors are forbidden to discuss cases outside the court, in the interests of justice. In the case of the Internet it seems “anything goes,” and in any event is seemingly impossible to regulate. In two famous recent cases the identity of ‘minors’ accused of criminal offences, suppressed by the Courts, were freely available on the Internet.

However appealing the idea of freedom of speech is, unconstrained use of it can be dangerous. An example given was of the partly-failed attempt in Japan to kill a large number of people who were using the underground. The reason for the ‘failure,’ that even more people were not killed, and the solution to it, was discussed on the Internet, thus offering a means of more effective mass murder to whoever might be interested.

Directly linked to freedom of speech, freedom of information, and access, is the subject of censorship. As previously discussed, the accessibility of pornographic material is legally constrained in the UK. However, with sex sites among the five most popular UK web sites many taking part in the discussion were convinced that regulation in this instance was necessary, although difficult. The Church has traditionally given guidance on moral values, and could perhaps play a part here, although it was noted that the Church did not currently have a great presence on the Internet.

6. International Issues

One of the ethical considerations related to the global nature of the Internet was concerning the side-effects of pervasive systems. Specifically, the potential power available to whoever has the control and operation of the system. These matters are already being addressed in the United States, but it is not impossible to conceive of a situation where one person with enough money could buy control.

On the subject of money, new technology offers new scope and opportunities for fraudulent activities. It was suggested that although this is something to be aware of in an ethical framework, these are not fundamentally new crimes, simply adaptations of old methods. However software theft and information warfare are examples of crimes where there is no physical interaction between the perpetrator and the victim, and may be genuinely new. Already, UK law struggles to cope with non-physical crimes: one theft trial collapsed when the defendants successfully argued that no actual money had been taken from a Bank, ‘all’ that had happened was that computer records had been altered. How the law would cope with, say, interfering with the software in an artificial limb, in a biosensor or in a memory implant, remains to be seen. The problem is exacerbated by the sense of the erosion of territorial boundaries expressed by the Internet, and hence a loss of traditional controls.

This apparent lack of territorial boundaries also raises questions of sovereignty and democracy — would the technology further the unity of the world or merely confirm the dominance of an elite? Is there, or should there be, a right of “Cyber equity” — each person having access to Cyberspace?

7. Possible routes towards regulation

It was acknowledged that regulation of new technology operating on a global scale raises difficulties. Having said that, some steps could be initiated on a national level

using existing influential bodies — these being Government, Church and relevant professional organisations.

The Government could play in part in formulating new acts of communication and education. The distinction was made between the benefits of “access to it all” in contrast to “access to them all.” That is, the advantage of access to information by individuals without the invasion of privacy (either caused by unwanted marketing or previously discussed personal information held on databases). It was suggested that information providers might welcome a legal definition of their role in order to push the barriers. Also within the Government domain it was felt a policy of encouraging competition was important to provide the consumer with choice, thus keeping prices down.

The question was asked whether there should be one body of focus within the Government. Currently many of the concerns discussed above fall under different Government departments, for example, the Home Office (obscenity, privacy, data protection), Cabinet Office (freedom of information), DTI (Department of Trade and Industry; IT), and the DfEE (Department for Education and Employment; National Curriculum, IT in schools). Perhaps it is time to have a unifying committee with some overview responsibility for these related issues. The development of the bio-ethical framework in the UK had been greatly influenced by the Warnock Committee in the early 1980s which gave an overview report on a range of related issues; was there a need for a similar overview on IT/Telecoms-related matters?

It was thought that there was an opportunity for both the Government and the Church to help create a sense of balance, providing guidance and help for people at a time of great technological and social change. These are influential bodies who could take steps to generate a culture which respects the use of personal information. One Christian body is investigating the possibility of a charter to guide Christian use, but they also have the potential to provide deep analysis of the moral and ethical questions raised by the Internet, perhaps providing a “theology of information.” The Church has a long history of involvement with physical community. Not everyone agreed: some argued that the Church had dominated earlier communication technologies (such as printing) because it could read, but that now it is in a situation where it can’t read and is irrelevant. Of course there are some highly IT-literate Christians: the Church of England, for instance, has recently formed a Committee to write a report on IT-related issues involving three Christian Professors of Computer Science, and a representative from the Roman Catholic Church.

There is great scope within the field of education to teach people (including children in schools) how to use computers to benefit from them, and at the higher education level to teach “ethical systems engineering.” A start has already been made in this area, though we note that most of what is called “ethical” is in fact Western business, corporate and professional codes of conduct.

8. Alternatives to regulation

Some people advocate self-regulation of the Internet, to this end suggestions were made that self-development, leading to a sense of individual responsibility, should be encouraged. There should be help for people to think how they want to use the new technology — again it was suggested the Church and Government could provide useful foundations. At a practical level digital signatures were discussed, which could help users to filter unwanted correspondence.

9. New Issues

On the subject of whether there were any new ethical issues emerging with new technology several items of note were made. At the technological level, cryptography provides security of information, but the question of third party involvement raises concerns of trustworthiness. In addition, encryption is considered nationally sensitive, on a par with national security. Very little seems to be understood about the wider implications of public key cryptography, and that it can support new forms of interaction between people.

At a more abstract level, national identity, and traditional concepts of sovereignty and democracy may also be challenged by the universal nature of the technology where physical boundaries become invisible. In the virtual world new concepts are called for: we are seeing the introduction of unphysical interactions leading to unphysical crimes. (Though “unphysical” crimes, such as blackmail and libel, are well-established.)

Relationships between employer and employee, in particular expectations of commitment, may need to be addressed. Technological facilities are being provided enabling work to be carried out from any location at any time, as a result work infringes on personal time and space. Are employers expecting full time commitment, or at the least, are employees under pressure of unspoken expectations? How will this impact on family and social life? Will new technology provide a means of employment (and income) beyond the traditional retirement age? If that is the case, then traditional methods of economic forecasting and analysis which is based on currently unproductive sections of society will need to be re-appraised.

Finally the speed of technological advancement provides challenges to traditional methods of control and legislation. Legislation in a democracy is a lengthy process. Effective discussion and debate, analysis and optimum methods of enforcement, all take time — with new technology “time moves fast.”

10. Notes on the Colloquia

This section outlines a few of our personal views.

10.1. Representation

A serious problem arises in discussing ethical issues of IT: the natural selectivity of people. The Internet brings together an enormous number of people, and raises an enormous number of issues and situations. However, as humans, we naturally accommodate to common behaviour. Our awareness and attention are drawn to unusual situations. Therefore there is a tendency to discuss infrequent, as opposed to representative issues. Moreover, we read and watch media that — by their nature — draw unusual situations to our attention. We become familiar with the reported situations, and in any group discussion there is a shared familiarity, which tends to lend the situations an increased significance. Because the media typically reports controversial incidents, in most discussions their apparent statistical significance will often become inflated. Some issues may seem important because of their salience in the shared consciousness of the participants (who all consume essentially the same media), rather than because of their actual importance to the community.

In an ideal world, perhaps the media would report important rather than exciting issues! Therefore, to make useful (as opposed to sentimental) progress, care should be taken to distinguish perceived salience from actual occurrence. Some things we worry about may objectively have low risk.

Any debate of socio-ethical issues depends on the ethical frameworks adopted: for example, on a utilitarian view discussing frequency is central, whereas on an absolutist view discussing specific situations regardless of frequency is appropriate. The Colloquia happened in the House of Lords, which (as a legislative chamber) arguably has a bias towards the prescriptive, though this was not mentioned.

Getting agreement on ethical pre-supposition is clearly a difficult task, and the chairman of the second colloquium raised the point that a Church perspective is not necessarily a majority view. In many ways, “ethical implications of IT” is a frighteningly young area — given the rapid assimilation of IT into society — and much has to be done. A consideration of the spiritual implications is even younger. We believe that further debates with explicit encouragement to try to lift the particular to the analytic could be valuable. If so, it could be useful to have professional moral philosophers and sociologists attending.

10.2. Organisation

The organisation of the meetings affected how successful they were.

Both meetings were held in committee rooms, which were organised on a level floor with a top table for the chairman, speakers and other officials (e.g., secretaries). The chairman introduced the meeting, then two pre-chosen speakers (one Religious and one Industry) made brief presentations of about 20 minutes. The chairman then opened the discussion to the room. Speakers responded to questions or points raised, however as the meetings progressed, and time began to run out, eventually several points would be taken from the audience at a time. Finally, the speakers were given an opportunity to summarise, and the chairman concluded.

Both meetings were followed by meals, and discussion continued at separate tables, of about six people. There was no attempt made to summarise these separate discussions to the whole meeting. The number of participants at the meal (about 40) and the timing meant that very few people (with the exception of the top table) had more than one opportunity to contribute.

The first meeting had two well-prepared speakers who made almost-opposing points. The audience responded to those points, and by-and-large had a focused discussion. The second debate was apparently driven more by participants’ prior concerns. More people read from notes, and although a wider range of issues was raised, there was — in our opinion — less real communication. In the second meeting, there was less discussion between participants. There was some overlap between the participants of the two meetings, and possibly familiarity with the meeting format the second time around also helps explain the difference.

Any such meeting has to find a delicate balance. Participants want to contribute their expertise and ideas, some will want to learn or engage in debate. Is it better to collect diverse ideas, or to have a debate where people change their minds, and perhaps, at the end, there are fewer ideas represented?

11. Conclusions

If technology can’t solve problems, why should we think ethics can — after all, aren’t both human constructions?

- We never really see the limitations of our own ethical frameworks, because we live within our own paradigms and do not see the boundaries. The views expressed in this paper originated from members of the UK. Are these points distinctly British, or do they reflect more general issues? Are there cross cultural issues not visible — and not visible in the UK — until now? The Church was

heavily represented in the meetings: are references to its influence more widely shared in the UK, and is the concern about the influence of the Church just a British issue?

- Technology is so easy to separate from humanity. Ethics goes against this, by explicitly asking about rightness, not just whether something works. That things can be done does not mean that they ought to be done; moreover, that technology allows some things to be done on such a huge scale as if they were a significant part of human activity does not mean that we ought to accept them — confusing *de jure* with *de facto*.

It is clear that new technologies are pressing existing — sometimes fundamental, sometimes merely sentimental — boundaries of right and wrong. The way these issues are resolved will have an enormous impact on future society. We believe that there has been very little inter-cultural discussion that relates to the issues. Arguably, most previous conflicts of “pure thought” in the world’s history have led to physical conflict. We are now living in a society where the scale of potential physical conflict is mind-boggling, should anyone wish to initiate it, and where the number of participants in cyberspace is the largest ever gathering of people the world has ever had. The statistics, then, are against us, and the urgency of establishing effective and practical ethical frameworks of IT is obvious.

Reference

The Colloquium website contains all the publicly available material about the two colloquia, including the addresses of the Bishop of London and Steve Shirley (the keynote speakers in the first colloquium) and summaries of all the discussion. Further contributions are welcome. The Colloquium URL is:

<http://www.btinternet.com/~nbch/wcitcol.html>