

Information ethics and Internet research ethics: An interview with Rafael Capurro

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Abstract

The emergence of the Internet and new technologies along with their challenges, have caused more attention to new and special aspects of ethics. This is an interview with Rafael Capurro on information ethics and Internet research ethics. This interview is given on the occasion of an invitation from Prof. Jafar Mehrad to visit the Islamic World Science Citation Center (ISC) and the Regional Information Center for Science and Technology (RICEST) in Shiraz (Iran) from September 30 to October 5, 2014, and to give a number of lectures on the information concept and on information ethics.

Keywords

Information ethics; Internet research ethics, World Wide Web

How do you define Ethics?

Ethics is a philosophical discipline dealing with a critical analysis of customs (*mores*) and rules of human behavior. The Greek term *philosophia ethiké* was coined in the Western tradition by Aristotle. In his *Nicomachean Ethics* he makes a difference between the *ethos* and the character of a person and *philosophia ethiké* as the reflection upon it. Aristotle divided

'practical philosophy' (*philosophia praktiké*) into three sub-disciplines dealing with the formation of the individual character (*ethiké*), the issues of administration of the family or 'house' (*oikos, oikonomiké*) and the 'political' issues (*politiké*) corresponding to the subdivision of society in ancient Greece.

Ethics has a long and complex history that includes the translation and commentaries of Aristotle's works into Arabic and Persian in the middle Ages. See my research paper: "Apud Arabes. Notes on the Greek, Latin, Arabic and Persian Roots of the Concept of Information" (2014), online at <http://www.capurro.de/iran.html>, for further details.

In its present understanding, Ethics deals with issues related to values, customs and rules of fair play in today's society as well as in other epochs and cultures. Due to the complexity of the issues in areas such as biology, business, medicine and media, ethical reflection is subdivided into, for instance, bioethics, business ethics, medical ethics and media or information ethics depending on whether media ethics is supposed to deal with mass media and information ethics with internet issues. A further sub-division is appropriate when dealing with ethical issues of Internet research (Internet research ethics).

It is important to stress the difference between ethics as a philosophical discipline and morality as the given behavioral rules in a society. This difference between the reflection (ethics) and its object (morality) is important due particularly to the fact that ethics and morality are often used as synonyms in everyday language. Since Modernity, Ethics is conceived as dealing with what we *ought* to do while for the pre-modern Western tradition Ethics deals with different views of *good life* or of what we *want* to do in order to achieve good life. Both traditions are interwoven. The modern utilitarian tradition, for instance, is closely related to traditional views of Ethics.

An important aspect of today's understanding of Ethics concerns issues of individual and social responsibility with regard to the impact of our choices particularly in light of the influence of science and technology on society as well as on the environment (ecological ethics). While information and communication technologies (ICTs) open doors to new technological and scientific possibilities, they also act as a catalyst to an unprecedented encounter with otherness, ensuring through digital mediums the en masse collision of hitherto closed ethical systems and cultural worldviews. Such a collision increases, on one hand, the potential for cultural conflicts, while creating, on the other hand, an ungrounded and abyssal reality that necessitates an existential accountability to ethical commitment apart from an adherence to any universal or metaphysical standards, demanding pluralism and a pluralistic foundation to ethics that both understands and accounts for difference. It is only through such a foundation that commonalities can be found.

Ethics deals not only with the foundation of morality but also with its problematization. Many issues that arise from science and technology cannot be adequately dealt with on the basis of traditional customs and rules of fair play alone.

What is the relation between Information Ethics and Internet Research Ethics?

Regarding my understanding of Information Ethics, allow me to quote from the site of the *International Center Information Ethics* (ICIE) of which I am responsible: <http://icie.zkm.de/research>

1. Information Ethics as Applied Ethics

Information ethics deals with ethical questions particularly:

- in the Internet (Cybernetics; Information ethics in a narrower sense)
- in Computer Science (Computer ethics)
- in the Biological and Medical Sciences (Bioinformation ethics)
- in the Mass Media (Media ethics)
- in the Library and Information Science field (Library ethics)
- in the Business field (Business information ethics)

2. Information Ethics as a Descriptive and Emancipatory Theory

- Information ethics as a descriptive theory explores the power structures influencing informational attitudes and traditions in different cultures and epochs.
- Information Ethics as an emancipatory theory develops criticisms of moral attitudes and traditions in the information field at an individual and collective level. It includes normative aspects.

Information ethics explores and evaluates:

- The development of moral values in the information field,
- The creation of new power structures in the information field,
- Information myths,
- Hidden contradictions and intentionality's in information theories and practices,
- The development of ethical conflicts in the information field.

3. Ethics for Information Specialists

Educational goals:

- To be able to recognize and articulate ethical conflicts in the information field,
- To activate the sense of responsibility with regard to the consequences of individual and collective interactions in the information field,

- To improve the qualification for intercultural dialogue on the basis of the recognition of different kinds of information cultures and values,
- To provide basic knowledge about ethical theories and concepts and about their relevance in everyday information work.

Regarding the scope and relevance of Internet Research Ethics, I would like to quote from the article "Internet Research Ethics" by Elizabeth Buchanan and Michael Zimmer in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-internet-research/>). They write:

"Conceptually and historically, Internet research ethics is related to computer and information ethics and includes such ethical issues as data privacy and confidentiality, integrity of data, intellectual property issues, and professional standards.

Yet, as the Internet has evolved into a more social and communicative tool and venue, the ethical issues have shifted from purely data driven to more human-centered. "On-ground" or face-to-face analogies may not be applicable to online research. For example, the concept of the public park has been used as a site where researchers can observe others, but online, the concepts of public and private are much more complex. Thus, some scholars suggest that the specificity of Internet research ethics calls for new regulatory and/or professional and disciplinary guidance."

The authors analyze the following ethical issues in Internet research, namely privacy, recruitment, informed consent and cloud computing.

Elizabeth A. Buchanan and Annette N. Markham, both members of *The Association of Internet Researchers* (AoIR) together with an AoIR ethics committee have developed guidelines for "Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research" (2012) <http://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf>. They deal with some "major tensions" concerning: human subjects, public/private, data (text)/persons, top-down versus bottom-up approaches to ethics.

The following ethical questions are addressed:

"How is the context defined and conceptualized?

How is the context (venue/participants/data) being accessed?

Who is involved in the study?

What is the primary object of study?

How are data being managed, stored, and represented?

How are texts/persons/data being studied?

How are findings presented?

What are the potential harms or risks associated with this study?

What are potential benefits associated with this study?

How are we recognizing the autonomy of others and acknowledging that they are of equal worth to ourselves and should be treated so?

What particular issues might arise around the issue of minors or vulnerable persons?"

The *International Journal of Internet Research Ethics* (<http://ijire.net/>) edited by Elizabeth A. Buchanan, Charles E. Ess and Annette N. Markham, of which three issues (2008, 2009 and 2010) are available so far, describe the scope of Internet Research Ethics as follows:

"As Internet Research Ethics has developed as its own field and discipline, additional questions have emerged: How do diverse methodological approaches result in distinctive ethical conflicts – and, possibly, distinctive ethical resolutions? How do diverse cultural and legal traditions shape what are perceived as ethical conflicts and permissible resolutions? How do researchers collaborating across diverse ethical and legal domains recognize and resolve ethical issues in ways that recognize and incorporate often markedly different ethical understandings? Finally, as "the Internet" continues to transform and diffuse, new research ethics questions arise – e.g., in the areas of blogging, social network spaces, etc. Such questions are at the heart of IRE scholarship, and such general areas as anonymity, privacy, ownership, authorial ethics, legal issues, research ethics principles (justice, beneficence, respect for persons), and consent are appropriate areas for consideration."

For further insight, see the *Center for Information Policy Research*, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (USA) (http://cipr.uwm.edu/?page_id=181).

It is apparent that there is a close relationship between Information Ethics and Internet Research Ethics particularly if the field of Information Ethics is focused on issues of the Internet.

What do you understand by 'research integrity'?

My understanding of research integrity aligns fully with the University of Oxford's "Code of Practice" on "Academic integrity in research"

<http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/personnel/cops/researchintegrity/>

I quote from it:

(1) The University expects all members of the University including staff and students and those who are not members of the University but who are conducting research on University premises or using University facilities or funding for their research, to observe the highest standards of ethics and integrity in the conduct of their research. In pursuance of such high standards they must:

- a) Be honest in proposing, conducting and reporting research. They should strive to ensure the accuracy of research data and results and acknowledge the contributions of others.
- b) Acquaint themselves with guidance as to best research practice and standards of integrity; (...) for example, the Code of Practice for Research published by

the UK Research Integrity Office or the Concordat to Support Research Integrity.

- c) Comply with ethical and legal obligations as required by statutory and regulatory authorities, including seeking ethical review and approval for research as appropriate. They should ensure that any research undertaken complies with any agreements, terms and conditions relating to the project, and allows for proper governance and transparency.
 - d) Seek to ensure the safety, dignity, wellbeing and rights of those associated with the research.
 - e) Effectively and transparently manage any conflicts of interest, whether actual or potential, reporting these to the appropriate authority as necessary.
 - f) Ensure that they have the necessary skills and training for their field of research.
 - g) Recognize their accountability to the University and their peers for the conduct of their research.
 - h) having due regard to subject disciplinary norms, acknowledge that authorship of a research output should be attributed only to a researcher who has made a significant intellectual, scholarly or practical contribution to that output and is willing to take responsibility for the contribution.
 - i) Follow the requirements and guidance of any professional bodies in their field of research. Researchers who are members of a regulated profession must follow the requirements and guidance of the body regulating their profession.
- (2) Failure to comply with this Code of Practice and Procedure may give rise to an allegation of Misconduct in Research (as further defined in 3). Misconduct in Research may be a ground for disciplinary action [3], and if serious, for dismissal or expulsion."

Can you give some examples of research misconduct?

I would like to highlight the issue of plagiarism, an issue that has become a major problem in German universities but also in schools. Some prominent persons such as the former German Minister of Defense, Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, and the former German Minister of Education and Research, Annette Schavan, resigned as ministers after the universities of Bayreuth and Düsseldorf revoked their doctorates due to plagiarism. See further examples at: <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plagiat>

How much do these examples differ from other cases in a traditional media environment previous to the internet?

In fact, the example of Annette Schavan shows that although she wrote her dissertation in 1980 in a traditional media environment there is no great difference with regard to the

misconduct from other cases in today's Internet environment. What is different is that, thanks to the development of plagiarism software, it has become easier to unveil such cases than it was in the past.

What are the goals of the International Center for Information Ethics?

The *International Center for Information Ethics* (<http://icie.zkm.de>) is an interdisciplinary and intercultural world-wide *network* of colleagues interested in information ethics. The aim of the Center is announced on the ICIE website as follows:

"This is an academic website on information ethics. It is a platform for exchanging information about worldwide teaching and research in our field. It gives the opportunity to meet each other. It provides news on ongoing activities by different kinds of organizations. And it is free. The success of this website depends on the will of the people interested in this subject to share their knowledge with others."

In 1999, long before the present online social networks were created, I tried to create an academic community in order to better exchange ideas and projects and to communicate online. This idea was and is supported by the *Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe* (ZKM) (<http://zkm.de>) as well as by different sponsors such as the *Volkswagen Stiftung* that made possible several national and international conferences (<http://icie.zkm.de/meetings>), particularly the first international conference on Intercultural Information Ethics held in Karlsruhe in 2004 (<http://icie.zkm.de/congress2004>).

Thanks to the support of Dr. Felix Weil (Stuttgart) we started, in 2004, the free online journal *International Review of Information Ethics* (IRIE) <http://www.i-r-i-e.net>.

In 2001 the ICIE launched a book series at Fink Verlag (Munich) consisting to date of five volumes. <http://icie.zkm.de/publications/books>

The Center has co-organized several international conferences and meetings, particularly in Africa, under the patronage of UNESCO, with the support of the Department of Communications of South Africa, in cooperation with the *African Centre of Excellence for Information Ethics* at the Department of Information Science of the University OF Pretoria, South Africa and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (USA). (<http://web.up.ac.za/default.asp?ipkCategoryID=19309&subid=19309&ipklookid=7>).

What is the impact of the ICIE in the development of Information Ethics? Are there any other similar organizations?

I think that the main impact has been to make academic research on Information Ethics more visible and engaged with different parts of the world, particularly in Africa but also in Latin America (Brazil, Mexico) and in the Far East (Japan, China). A similar but more formal organization is the *Internet Society for Ethics and IT* (INSEIT) <http://www.inseit.net>. See more at: <http://icie.zkm.de/institutions> as well as <http://icie.zkm.de/teaching> regarding the teaching of information ethics.

What are the main topics of Information Ethics today?

There are cutting-edge topics such as transparency, privacy and secrecy in the post-Snowden era. See *Ethics of Secrecy* <http://www.i-r-i-e.net/issue17.htm> that are intertwined with issues dealing with big data, the Internet of things and robotics. See *Ethics for the Internet of Things* http://www.i-r-i-e.net/call_for_papers_22.htm

These issues are closely related to the development of the information and knowledge society with different shapes according to cultural settings and political agendas. The impact of the Internet in developing countries, known as the 'digital divide', is still a major issue, particularly concerning the relevance of mobile technologies for emerging economies as well as for the educational sector. See *The Digital Future of Education*: http://www.i-r-i-e.net/current_issue.htm

ICTs play a major role in social and political movements: See *New ICTs and Social Media: Revolution, Counter-Revolution and Social Change* <http://www.i-r-i-e.net/issue18.htm>, issues that are closely interrelated with online social networks. See *Ethics of Online Social Networks* <http://www.i-r-i-e.net/issue16.htm>

There is an ongoing societal change concerning the issue of citizenship, now an object of research centered around changing understandings of citizenry as being digitally influenced and informed through Internet identities, where globalization takes place, in part, online, and where perspectives of nationalism and state become intertwined with the Internet as traditional borders are greyed and ideas of 'home' and 'space' are supplanted by the digital realm. See *Global Citizenship* http://www.i-r-i-e.net/call_for_papers_23.htm).

Eventually, ethical issues of cyber warfare will also be a major research topic in information ethics. See *Cyber Warfare* <http://www.i-r-i-e.net/issue20.htm>

What is your advice for those interested in doing research in the field of Information Ethics?

I would recommend to those interested in the field to keep their eyes open with regard to present and future challenges of the digital age. To cooperate interdisciplinary and intercultural with students around the world-wide in order to achieve a common basis for research, acknowledging differences and looking for commonalities concerning methodologies and objects of study. To give each other the academic and personal recognition everyone deserves. To look back and retrieve again and again the rich cultural and philosophical traditions of humanity in order not to become obsessed by the present dynamic of information technology with its narrow-minded and shortsightedness share-value oriented perspective.

And, above all, I would recommend to those interested in the field to look carefully at all kinds of dystopian and pathological phenomena of the digital age. Such phenomena are often excluded from the research focus of the digital global players and their marketing departments no less than from academic research institutions due to defense mechanisms that prescribe students not to critically assess anything outside the official paradigms and agendas of the institution. It is important as well for the student of information ethics to understand that the

university institution often wrongly assumes the necessary ethics 'quotient' fulfilled through mandatory intro ethics courses, and as such feels no need for any further focus on ethics, neglecting in the process a deeper and holistic understanding of ethics in all facets of education, especially pertaining to education in a digital age. There is no single discipline or subject that is not in need of a deeper critical ethical reflection, especially concerning the pathological phenomena of the digital age. In other words, ethics concerns us, all of us. It concerns the kind of human beings we want to be and the kind of human beings we want not to be as humanity enters and strives to navigate the uncharted waters of the digital age.

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