Ethical Challenges in a Computerized Society

Henry Osborn Quarshie
Lecturer Regent University College of Science & Technology, Accra, Ghana.
Hquarshie@yahoo.com / sirhoq@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The increasing sophistication of computer technology with its capacity to collect, analyze and disseminate information on individuals poses a great challenge to society today. The Collection of information about users has become a lucrative business. The extensive and rapid adoption of computers by business organizations and society in general has aggravated existing ethical issues and led to the emergence of new ethical issues. The purpose of this paper is to interrogate the ethical issues in a computerized society from 1980s to the 2000s. The paper looked at discussions and issues raised from 1980 to 2000. When society entered the twenty-first century, many looked to technology and it’s potential to solve human problems. The hope that technology can solve the problems of this century seems justified when one considers the powerful nature of technology in transforming life. As society develops, we must be both hopeful as well as cautious about the technologies we adopt and the ways in which we use them as they affect us in both good and bad ways. Human values are transformed in both ways, good and bad. The research revealed that computer technology poses a great challenge to human ethics and society at large. Computer technology continue to change and reform society. The ethics of today which society holds dear to is not the same ethics tomorrow as a result of computer technological changes. Ethical principles should be developed and awareness created to prevent unethical computer and internet practices.

Keywords: Ethics, computer, society.

1. INTRODUCTION

In most countries of the world, the “computer revolution” has altered many aspects of life significantly, such as education, travelling, commerce, security, privacy and confidentiality, communication and many others. The computer revolution has consequently affected society in both good ways and bad ways.

Computer ethics in the broadest sense can be understood as that branch of applied ethics which studies and analyses such social and ethical impacts of information technology [1].

Ethics is a set of moral principles that govern the behavior of a group or individual. Therefore, computer ethics is set of moral principles that regulate the use of computers. Some common issues of computer ethics include privacy and confidentiality concerns and how computers affect society [1].

A number of definitions on computer ethics have been provided, James Moor provided a definition of computer ethics that is much broader and more wide-ranging. It is said to be independent of any specific philosopher’s theory; and it is compatible with a wide variety of approaches to ethical problem-solving [2].

Since 1985, Moor’s definition has been the most influential one. He defined computer ethics as a field concerned with “policy vacuums” and “conceptual muddles” regarding the social and ethical use of information technology. A typical problem in Computer Ethics arises because there is a policy vacuum about how computer technology should be used [2].

Computers provide us with new capabilities and these in turn give us new choices for action. Often, either no policies for conduct in these situations exist or existing policies seem inadequate. A central task of Computer Ethics is to determine what we should do in such cases, that is, formulate policies to guide our actions. One difficulty is that along with a policy vacuum there is often a conceptual vacuum. Although a problem in Computer Ethics may seem clear initially, a little reflection reveals a conceptual muddle. What is needed in such cases is an analysis that provides a coherent conceptual framework within which to formulate a policy for action [2].

The aim of the paper is to review attempts made in revealing the ethical challenges we face as we advance in the use of technology.

2. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this paper is to interrogate the contributions made by various thinkers in the study of computer ethics covering a period of twenty years. In reviewing ethical issues in a computerized society the paper looked at contributions from 1980 to 2000.

3. LITERATURE OVERVIEW

3.1 Thinkers in the 1980s

In the 1980s, a number of social and ethical consequences of information technology were becoming public issues in America and Europe. Issues like computer-enabled crime, disasters caused by computer failures, invasions of privacy via computer databases, and major law suits regarding software ownership, but the works of Parker, Weizenbaum, Maner and others, had laid the foundation for computer ethics as an academic discipline and research. The time was ripe, therefore, for the exploring of activities in computer ethics.

In the mid-80s, James Moor of Dartmouth College published his influential article "What Is Computer Ethics?" Computers and Ethics, a special issue of the journal...
Metaphilosophy [2]. In addition, Deborah Johnson of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute published Computer Ethics, the first textbook and for more than a decade, defining textbook in the field [3]. There were also relevant books published in psychology and sociology.

In the early 80s, Terrell Ward Bynum assisted Maner in publishing his Starter Kit in Computer Ethics at a time when most philosophers and computer scientists considered the field to be unimportant [4].

### 3.2 Thinkers in the 1990s

The 1990s saw the emergence of new university courses, research institutes, conferences, journals, articles and textbooks appearing, and a wide diversity of additional scholars and topics also evolving.

Researchers and thinkers such as Donald Gotterbarn, Keith Miller, Simon Rogerson and Dianne Martin as well as organizations like Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, ACM-SIGCAS - spearheaded projects relevant to computing and professional responsibility. Developments in Europe and Australia were especially noteworthy, including new research centers in England, Poland, Holland, and Italy.

The ETHICOMP series of conferences led by Simon Rogerson, the CEPE conferences founded by Jeroen van den Hoven and the Australian Institute of Computer Ethics headed by Chris Simpson and John Weckert. These important developments were significantly aided by the pioneering work of Simon Rogerson of De Montfort University (UK), who established the Centre for Computing and Social Responsibility. In Rogerson's view, there was need in the mid-1990s for a "second generation" of computer ethics developments [1].

### 3.3 Thinkers in the 2000s

Technological maturity in the 2000s has reached a point where information of nearly every form is available at the touch of a button, the click of a mouse or the pointing of a cursor. Access is now possible to all forms of information including music, moving images, literary works and art. But what does the new form of access do to human values? Does the technology detract or enhance the values of an individual? Whether value is being added or subtracted by such access need to be studied.

The Górniak Hypothesis – in her 1995 ETHICOMP paper, Górniak predicted that computer ethics, which is currently considered just a branch of applied ethics, will eventually evolve into something much more. It will evolve into a system of global ethics applicable in every culture on earth. Just as the major ethical theories of Bentham and Kant were developed in response to the printing press revolution, so a new ethical theory is likely to emerge from computer ethics in response to the computer revolution. The newly emerging field of information ethics, therefore, is much more important than even its founders and advocates believe [5].

The very nature of the Computer Revolution indicates that the ethics of the future will have a global character. It will be global in a spatial sense, since it will encompass the entire Globe. It will also be global in the sense that it will address the totality of human actions and relations [5].

Computers do not know borders. Computer network have a truly global character. Hence, when we are talking about computer ethics, we are talking about the emerging global ethics, the rules of computer ethics, no matter how well thought through, will be ineffective unless respected by the vast majority of or maybe even all computer users. This means that in the future, the rules of computer ethics should be respected by the majority (or all) of the human inhabitants of the Earth. In other words, computer ethics will become universal; it will be a global ethics [5].

At the dawn of the 21st century, computer ethics thinkers have offered the world two very different views of the likely ethical relevance of computer technology. The Wiener-Maner-Górniak point of view sees computer technology as ethically revolutionary, requiring human beings to reexamine the foundations of ethics and the very definition of a human life. The more conservative Johnson perspective is that fundamental ethical theories will remain unaffected – that computer ethics issues are simply the same old ethics questions with a new twist – and consequently computer ethics as a distinct branch of applied philosophy will ultimately disappear [1].

### 4. CONCLUSION

Society today finds itself in conflict because of the ethical dilemmas caused by technology. The relationship that exists between privacy and security is a volatile one. In this age of digital tracking capabilities, many people across the globe are concerned with the loss of privacy that occurs with each technological development. Others are more troubled with the need for heightened security in this time of escalating global hostilities and feel every technology should be implemented to preserve safety.

Computer technology is a rapidly developing field which makes it difficult to predict what is coming next. However, it is clear that the information society and individuals within this society will go on confronting radical technological and societal developments leading them to generate new patterns of behavior to accommodate these developments [6].

The computer technologies pose a great challenge to human ethics and society at large. Computer technology continue to change and reform society. The ethics of today which society holds dear to is not the same ethics tomorrow as a result of computer technological changes.
5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper suggests computer ethics awareness training because the advance of computing technology will continue to create temporary policy vacuums. Ethics training will make people more responsive, avoid computer abuse and catastrophes.

Ethical principles should be developed to prevent unethical computer and internet practices.

In addition, the concept of computer ethics should not be examined within the framework of ICT-related professional ethics; rather, it should be examined within the framework of personal ethics to be followed by all individuals of the information society [6, 7].

REFERENCES


