Ethics Education for the Online Environment

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INTRODUCTION

As a greater number of business transactions and communications are facilitated by the Internet, understanding individual behavior in this arena is becoming an important part of overall business ethics. One key issue that distinguishes transactions conducted via the Internet from those in traditional business settings is that of anonymity (Davenport, 2002). The sense of being anonymous and having little accountability allows individuals to behave in ways that they "traditionally" would not behave if they were known to the other parties involved. "Shame is less common in cyberspace because less strict moral norms pertain…" (Ben-Ze'ev, 2003). Kracher and Corritore (2004) explore whether e-commerce ethics and traditional brick-and-mortar ethics are the same. In their study, they outline the current ethical issues facing organizations, and ultimately state that e-commerce ethical issues are not completely unique but differ from traditional brick-and-mortar commerce in terms of manifestation and scope. The critical elements identified by Kracher and Corritore (2004) are used in this article to create a framework for introducing students to the ethical issues that need to be considered in the online arena.

In addition to the finding in the academic literature that the ethics environment in e-commerce is perceived differently by individuals, anecdotal evidence from the classroom also supports this idea. In-class discussions about these topics have shown that students' perceptions about ethics between the two environments are distinct. One example scenario is that of taking music. When the scenario is changed from discussing "copying of music files from the Internet" to "taking a music CD from the shelf of a retailer," the students' responses change dramatically. In the online situation, they were of the verbal persuasion that they did not feel guilt or moral obligation to not perform such an act (i.e., they intended to behave more unethically). However, when faced with a traditional ethical consideration, the students felt the act was unethical and they would not perform such an act (i.e., they intended to behave more ethically).

This presents a strong argument for expanding business ethics material taught to college students to include topics related to electronic commerce and other online business situations. A formal business education decreases one's tolerance for unethical behavior (Lopez, Rechner, & Olson-Buchanan, 2005); however, there is a lack of emphasis on ethics in university programs. Therefore, this article presents a four-point framework (PAPA, defined later) from the existing literature and poses ways to teach ethical conduct in the online arena to college students.

BACKGROUND

Kracher and Corritore (2004) identify six critical electronic commerce (i.e., Internet) ethics' issues: access, intellectual property, privacy and informed consent, protection of children, security of information, and trust. Previously, Mason (1986) identified the rights to information which include: property, access, privacy, and accuracy. Ethical categorization based on Mason's principles has been applied in many studies (refer to Leonard & Cronan, 2001; Leonard, Cronan, & Kreie, 2004). Mason's four principles overlap with the electronic commerce ethics' issues as follows:

1. **Property:** Intellectual property
2. **Access:** Access, protection of children, and security of information
3. **Privacy:** Privacy and informed consent and protection of children
4. **Accuracy:** Trust

These four categories (PAPA) provide an initial framework to present ethical scenarios to students. These ethical dilemmas relate to the online environment in general and to electronic commerce as well. The PAPA framework does not cover all of the ethical dilemmas that can be faced on the Internet. However, it does provide a good starting point for educators to consider as they begin to incorporate ethical issues that are specific to an information age where many transactions are conducted anonymously. Each of the four categories are explained below.

Property

Property focuses on who owns information about individuals and how information can be sold and exchanged (Mason, 1986). Intellectual property describes works of the mind, such as art, books, music, film, and so forth (Reynolds, 2003). In September 2000, Janet Reno, attorney general at the time, made reference to protecting intellectual property in a speech:

We need to change the cultural acceptance of theft of intellectual property, whether the theft is committed by stealing from a retail store or stealing using a computer. Either way, we are talking about theft, pure and simple. (Zoellick, 2002)

A common issue with electronic commerce is sharing purchased music, song by song, online with anyone in the world (Kracher & Corritore, 2004; Sama & Shoaf, 2002). Traditionally to accomplish the same task, music CDs would be purchased and then copies made and distributed.

Access

Access defines what information a person or organization has the right to obtain about individuals, and how this information can be accessed and used (Mason, 1986). In an online environment, access can also be thought of as an issue of having or not having computer access. Individuals without computer access cannot take advantage of the opportunities that the Internet offers, such as discounted airline fares offered on many Web sites (Kracher & Corritore, 2004). Access also is directly related to the protection of children. For example, pornography is increasingly accessible via the Internet to children, where as traditionally children gained access only through magazines, video stores, or television (Kracher & Corritore, 2004). Finally, access is a security concern (Kracher & Corritore, 2004; Stead & Gilbert, 2001). Traditionally, people give credit cards to waiters in restaurants to pay for meals where the waiter could be making a copy of the credit card information for himself. However, in the online environment the interception of credit card information is invisible to the user, and thus is believed to be more of a security threat.

Privacy

Privacy is protection from unreasonable intrusion upon one's isolation, from appropriation of one's name or likeness, from unreasonable publicity given to one's private life, and from publicity that unreasonably places one in a false light before the public (Reynolds, 2003; Zoellick, 2002). In an Internet-based environment, for example, store representatives can monitor one's shopping habits at many locations on the World Wide Web (WWW), whereas in a traditional retail outlet, retailers would not be able to follow an individual to many other store locations (Kracher & Corritore 2004). This can also be viewed as collecting customer information through a survey or information form in a retail store, or by monitoring a customer's clickstream in an online store (Kelly & Rowland, 2000; Stead & Gilbert, 2001). Privacy is also directly related to protecting children. For example, on the Internet, restrictions are made as to what information can be gathered from a child of a particular age. "Privacy law and theory must change to meet the needs of the digital age" (DeVries, 2003, p. 309).

Accuracy

Accuracy is concerned with the authenticity and fidelity of information, as well as identifying who is responsible for informational errors that harm people (Mason, 1986). In an Internet-based environment, individuals must be concerned with their personal information being accurately captured and secured from others. This is where trust comes into play. Without face-to-face interaction, Web sites are deemed to be less trustworthy (Kracher & Corritore, 2004). Web site designers instead create the impression of trust through Web site design, navigation systems, and seals of approval (Corritore et al., 2001).