

Information Ethics as Ideology

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INTRODUCTION

If we live indeed in the early stages of what has been termed the “information society,” then it is clear that ethical concerns with regards to information are of central importance. This can explain the growing interest in issues of information ethics. The use of the word “ethics” seems to suggest that there is something wrong or bad and that this can be addressed by morally acceptable means.

This article will take a different view. It will argue that issues and discourses concerning information ethics can be used for purposes that are not necessarily in accordance with the ethical assumptions on which they are built. The article should thus be seen in the tradition of critical research. It aims to promote the emancipation of researchers as well as practitioners with regards to the use of ethical terms in information, and information and communication technology (ICT). The main argument is that ethical discourses can be used as ideological tools. Ideology will be understood as a shared worldview that favors particular interests. It leads to the closure of debate and reification of meaning and understanding. An example of ideology could be the view that it is the nature of women to rear children and look after the home. If this is generally accepted as a true description of the world, then no debate about it is necessary. Clearly, such a view of the world is favorable for some, not for others. Moral arguments, this article will argue, lend themselves to contribute to ideology. In our example, a moral argument would be that it is good for women to conform with their natural role. This would strengthen the patriarchal ideology.

In order to support this contention, the article will begin by discussing an important concept in information ethics: privacy. I will argue that privacy derives its importance in current debates from its irreducible ethical quality. In the next step I will then define ideology and provide examples of how privacy can be used to promote particular interests. I will conclude the article by pointing out that it is the moral nature of the term *privacy* that renders it a useful tool for ideol-

ogy. I will discuss the question whether the debates in information ethics can or should react to such (mis)use of moral arguments.

THE ETHICS OF PRIVACY

When trying to prove that the moral quality of privacy is a factor in its use as ideology, one has to contend with two main difficulties: first, the debate on privacy is too extensive to be captured comprehensively in a brief section; second, the concept of ethics is even more complex. Ethics, an integral part of philosophy, has been formally discussed since the ancient Greeks. As part of the normative constitution of the social world, it predates philosophical discourse and permeates all areas of social interaction. In this article I will follow what has been termed the “German tradition” of moral philosophy (Stahl, 2004b) which distinguishes between morality as the factually accepted norms which guide individual and collective behavior and ethics as the theory and justification of morality. Moral rules are those that agents follow because they represent what is good and right. Examples of moral rules could be an obligation to help the needy or an interdiction to download proprietary software. Ethical theory explains why moral rules are desirable. It can draw on a rich history of justificatory ideas ranging from duty (deontology) to utility (teleology) to the individual character (virtue ethics). It is not the purpose of this article to engage in the ethical discourses surrounding privacy, but only to demonstrate their relevance by explicating some of the more frequently used arguments.

Privacy is generally acknowledged to be a (moral) good (Weckert & Adeney, 1997), but there is less agreement on what exactly it is or why it is valuable (Gavison, 1995; Shostack & Syverson, 2004). Historically, privacy concerns go back to the ancient Greeks (Rotenberg, 1998) but only acquired legal recognition towards the end of the nineteenth century (Sipior & Ward, 1995), when the most widely spread definition of the term as the “right to be let alone” was coined

by Warren and Brandeis (1890). This definition is still used today (Britz, 1999; Velasquez, 1998), but it lacks the clarity needed for a thorough investigation. Privacy can refer to control of information, social control (Culnan, 1993), to perceptions and psychological states (Velasquez, 1998), to rights and obligations, to personal curiosity or social structures.

What is probably beyond doubt is that the current interest in privacy is related to the use of information and communication technology, which includes computing and telecommunication technologies. It is difficult to clearly delineate because it pervades other technical and social fields. For the purposes of this argument, one can imagine technologies such as personal computers, the Internet, or mobile phones as examples. ICT arguably does not cause the collection and (potentially unwanted) use of data, but in many cases it facilitates such uses or renders them much easier (Anderson, Johnson, Gotterbarn, & Perrolle, 1993; Johnson, 2001). Privacy has thus been identified as one of the major ethical issues in ICT from the early days of the debate on computer and information ethics (Mason, 1986), but also in information management (Straub & Collins, 1990). The use of ICT thus leads to a change in the importance of privacy (Robison, 2000). As a result of the challenges of privacy, a variety of legal instruments have been developed by different countries (Chan & Camp, 2002).

What is of interest for this article is the ethical nature of privacy. This can best be observed by looking at the arguments proposing or justifying a right to privacy. Privacy can be seen as an absolute or a relative right. Where it is perceived as absolute, this means that it requires no further justification. It is then comparable to a natural right, something that is irreducible (Spinello, 1997). Such a “fundamental right” (Rogerson, 1998 p. 22) will have the status of a human right, which is reflected by the right to the respect to privacy as developed in Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights. However, some authors do not see privacy as absolute but relative, which means that it needs to be justified with regards to other values or rights. This distinction mirrors the one between privacy as an intrinsic or instrumental value (Tavani, 2000; Moor, 2000). Both sides of the argument agree, however, that privacy is a moral good. What they disagree on is the ethical justification and therefore the reach of the concept.

On the individual level, privacy is often described as a necessary condition for a healthy personal development. We require privacy to become autonomous and independent humans who are able to interact with others and create rewarding and useful relationships. Respecting privacy is thus an expression of the respect for the autonomy of others (Rachels, 1995; Elgesiem, 1996; Severson, 1997; Brown, 2000; Introna, 2000; Johnson, 2001). Since a society of incomplete individuals cannot function, privacy can also be justified by social considerations. Privacy not only allows us to develop healthy interpersonal relationships, it also seems to be required for democratic states to function (Gavison, 1995; Johnson, 2001), which is evidenced by the generally accepted procedure of casting secret ballots.

This brief characterization leaves open many questions. It does not address questions of the legal status of privacy, nor the exact limits of this perceived right or ways of adjudicating conflicts between privacy and other rights. It leaves open, for example, the issue whether or under which circumstances workplace surveillance is justified (Stahl, Prior, Wilford, & Collins, 2005). These shortcomings are not problematic for this article because the point of the discussion of privacy was to show that the concept is of an ethical nature. It is recognized as a moral value, which can be justified using a variety of ethical arguments ranging from utilitarian considerations to virtue issues and deontological arguments. Having thus established the importance of ethics in the discourse surrounding privacy, we can proceed to look at its use for ideological purposes.

PRIVACY AS IDEOLOGY

This section will start with a definition of the term “ideology” and then discuss how it relates to privacy.

Ideology

Ideology is an important concept of critical research in information systems as well as critical research in general. It is one of the central aims of critical research to expose ideologies because they limit the ability of the individual to perceive the world. Very briefly, critical research will here be characterized by its aim to

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