



Chapter I

**Understanding Social
Responsibility Issues in the
Information Age**

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So, you are taking a trip and have booked your flight, paid your bills, bought a travel insurance and made hotel bookings—all without talking to a single person. Of course, you used the Internet to accomplish your tasks. But how can you be sure that your personal information used to book flights, buy a travel insurance and make hotel bookings would not be used by the concerned companies to send you junk email or it is not sold to some direct marketers without your consent? How can you be sure that your personal information and credit card details were transmitted in a secure mode? How can you be sure that online businesses have proper high integrity business processes to handle your private information with due care? You may also have worries that if something does go wrong, i.e., your personal information is stolen, misused or abused, what recourse would you have. These are all legitimate social responsibility concerns which have surfaced more so in the information age because of technological advances and our growing reliance on information and communication technologies to carry out our daily work.

The purpose of this chapter is to understand the social responsibility issues in the information age. This is done by considering social responsibility concerns at five levels:

- Issues of privacy and confidentiality
- Accessibility to technology issues
- Property rights and ownership issues
- Freedom of speech issues
- Issues of quality and reliability of information and the related systems.

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ISSUES OF PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

In recent years privacy has indeed moved high on the agenda of corporations, largely because of a number of lawsuits. In 2000 DoubleClick came under criticism when it moved to merge its consumer Web surfing database with its consumers' mail-order-catalog purchases database. This had followed the acquisition of Abacus Direct by DoubleClick. Although DoubleClick has since abandoned plans to merge the databases, the case has raised a number of interesting privacy and ethical questions (see chapter 6 for further details). In another case RealNetworks apologized for the ability ingrained into RealJukeBox to capture data about a consumers musical selections. Since no consent was sought from the listener, it was clearly an infringement of privacy. Microsoft was also criticized for including a personal identifier in the Windows 98 operating system. Microsoft had to later modify the registration process so as not to create a personal identifier. U.S. Bancorp had to sign a \$3 million settlement for having sold personal information to a direct marketer. Privacy and confidentiality are indeed critical to managing social responsibility in the information age. With respect to privacy Dhillon and Moores (2001) identify illegitimate sale of personal information and identity theft as the top two fundamental issues.

Two issues central to maintaining privacy, especially with respect to the Internet, relate to consent and process fairness. Clearly if an online business is requesting personal information, either for registering with them or for selling their products or services, consent must be sought from the consumer whether they wish to divulge this information. Clearly there are choices available to the consumer and the online business is aware that in order to gain the business, it cannot make revealing personal information mandatory. As has been argued elsewhere (Dhillon & Moores, 2001), once a consumer begins to trust an online business, there is an increased likelihood of the individual revealing personal information to the business in exchange for some benefit, such as customized service.

Process fairness is another issue which is critical to maintaining online privacy. If an individual is unsure as to the process followed by an online business in protecting personal information or the business process used, say, in order fulfillment, the consumer is not going to trust the nature of the transaction and the integrity of the operations. This means that the social contract between the consumer and the online business does not get established (cf. Culnan & Armstrong, 1999).

Clearly individual consumers are concerned about maintaining their privacy and perhaps protecting themselves from cybercrimes. Such concerns are also one of the main reasons for many individuals not using the Internet with a fair degree of confidence. At a technical level a number of developments are taking place which will result in enhancing chances of maintaining consumer privacy. iShopSecure, for example, has launched a Transact-Secure product that will eliminate online identification frauds and unwarranted chargebacks (see *Business Wire*, March 6, 2001). Such a product will go a long way in protecting consumers' interests even though the privacy was compromised.

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