

Chapter 18

Ethics of Information in Distributed Business Environment

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to examine some of the issues of ethics related to information in DBE. The ethical issue of what is moral to do in order to optimize the use of information in DBE is dealt with. The varied ways of integrating and putting into the practice information in DBE is discussed as well as the great variety of ethical approaches. In the field of ethics of information in DBE we are no longer confronted with “policy vacuum”; we are facing dissipation of ethical responsibility (DER) and this phenomenon leads to difficult and usually late localisation and solving of ethical dilemmas within the system.

INTRODUCTION

Current ethics is limited by the antagonistic attitude of researchers and practitioners in information in DBE, and the use of information raises new ethical dilemmas in the making of ethical decisions. The ethical approach may signal the need for a new code of ethics and new values that should be better suited to our times. We present the state-of-the-art and discuss the importance of ethics in DBE and its emerging developments.

Yan, Wang and Chand (2004, p. 42) consider that “the enterprise usually collects information from spread sub-companies. This kind of the enterprise is called as distributed business environment”.

A DBE is more complex than “an enterprise that collects information” and can be described as an environment in which two worlds live together, the real world in which the human factor is the most important resource, and the virtual world in which the basic resource is information. In this environment the former boundaries of organisations disappear because of modern information technology reasons distributed all over the world.

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The permanent goal of the real world is survival and success. In order to attain these targets, the real world requires permanent changes which, in turn, impose improvements of the systems that function in the virtual world. Therefore, the human factor must adapt its behaviour to the permanent changes that occur in the real world, and solve the ethical dilemmas in a responsible way, accountable by the use of information that exists in the relation between the affordances of the virtual world and these changes. For instance, more recently, the INTERNET has changed the business style of organisations, while modern information systems (e.g. Web or grid services) have made the business environment react more quickly.

This chapter aims to emphasize the relevance of the ethics of information in *DBE* and to discuss the main issues related to this subject.

Consequently, we demonstrate that it is possible for a variety of ethical approaches to be integrated and put into the practice of information in *DBE* and we seek the answer to the following questions:

- How should ethics of information in *DBE* be defined and applied?
- How to solve any ethical dilemma that may arise?
- What are the economic, social, cultural and ethical implications these may create?
- What are the specific ethical responsibilities of professionals that take action in this domain?

This chapter is organized as follows: Section 1 offers some ethical historical approaches useful to localize our subject in the computer ethics field. In section 2 we provide a detailed presentation of the aspects of the ethics of information in *DBE*. In section 3 we discuss some solutions and recommendations to solve the ethical dilemmas of information in *DBE*. In the next section future research directions are given, which represent a real

opportunity to develop ethical guidance specific to information in *DBE* based on practical situations the actors and organisations are confronted with. Finally, we draw some brief conclusions regarding *dissipation of ethical responsibility* which is the most important phenomenon that influences ethical decisions and creates most of the ethical dilemmas in a *DBE*.

SHORT HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ETHICS IN LITERATURE

Economic, social and technological progresses have broadened the range and comprehensiveness ethical issues, both from the perspective of the individual and society. This may explain the interest of philosophers, sociologists, psychologists and other professionals in ethical dilemmas, irrespective of their nature

Like any issue with deep philosophical roots, debates on ethical issues have stirred controversies synchronically and diachronically. The more ethical problems are surrounded by unknown elements, the more controversial and heated the debates are. After more than two thousand years, Aristotle's ethical theory, with its individualistic perceptions of life, based on virtues and vices, remains one of the most important achievements in ethics (Aristotle, 2000).

Major ethical theories, e.g. *universalism* and *relativism*, using specific arguments, which justify man's actions and their consequences, are in continual competition in the difficult process of tracing the line between right and wrong. *Ethical universalism* proclaims that right and wrong should be viewed from the perspective of the consequences of an action. *Ethical relativism* considers that there are no universal moral norms, and right and wrong are relative notions, depending on the cultural, temporal, social and local context characteristics in which the action is carried out (Bowie, 1999). Consequently, rational ethical

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