

Challenges for Information Ethics in the emerging Digital World

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Abstract: *This paper provides an empirical approach related to the challenges for information ethics in the current digital era. Ethics is common all professions and organisations. The methodology and level of maintaining ethics varies between different organisations and professions. Corporations follow internal and external ethics. Internal ethics for handling the employees and external ethics for marketing, customer service and handling suppliers. In simple language ethics is moral science. But with bludgeoning competition between product manufacturers, service provider's ethics and ethical values are compromised by the companies. Similarly with respect to individuals, each one wants to prove their worth in the organisation, ethical values are seldom practiced. In modern era, ethics will be adopted by both organisations and individuals if it is a money spinner. The word ethics in this context needs to be given a strict interpretation so that ethical value is not diluted. Ethics needs to be followed while handling information also. The rule for handling the information varies across different countries and also with respect to the information category. The information can be personal, official or related to government. The paper provides an insight into this focusing on the challenges and provides recommendations for maintaining ethics in the digital world. The need for a centralised digital authority to monitor the digital records, audit them and take action against infringement of ethics is very much required.*

KEYWORDS: *Ethics, Information ethics, Digital, ethical value, category*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The word “ethics” means principle, integrity or belief which will be exercised either by an individual or a corporate. The dictionary meaning of ethics can be precise but it is difficult to apply it in real situations. In other words ethics and belief are individual's perspective rather than a set of practices. Ethics can be classified as personal, professional and corporate. Personal ethics deals with individual communication and information relating to individuals whereas professional ethics is about the values to be adhered by an individual who is in a particular profession. Corporate ethics refers to ethics adopted by organisations and this is again organisation specific.

2. INFORMATION ETHICS:

We need to define the term information ethics. It means using information ethically. This again applies to both individuals and corporate. Individuals handle lot of information every day and there may be situations where the information needs to be passed on to another and it is created. In such instances, source of information needs to be acknowledged in order to adhere to ethical practices. In case of corporate where they enter into technology transfer agreement with their partner, it will be ethical to state the name of the partner who has shared their technology details. In this context a question arises as to what is meant by fair use of information. This is not a rigid zone and unless some statutory regulations are available it is the individual's prerogative to decide the fair use of information. For example, presently all transactions are web enabled and a primary requirement of website is mandatory for allowing online transactions. Strictly looking at the word “fair-use”, all website should be unique. But in reality it may not be the case since the website structure may be more or less identical. Can we conclude that information ethics is breached by subsequent companies who are promoting their products? This is a tricky affair since uniqueness may not be in appearance alone and it can be built in several modules of the website. In order to have a good corporate image, websites are designed to have some element of uniqueness in order to avoid unwanted litigations. This is not the case in all situations and this may vary with different businesses. Biscuit or food product manufacturer may use the same ingredients to manufacture and this will not qualify for breach of information ethics. We need to understand a term called chemical formula that is used in preparing food products and pharmaceuticals. But the catch is in the brand name. If the competitor uses a similar brand name then it qualifies for breach of information ethics. Let us take an

example of a researcher who does research in a chosen topic. The researcher goes through the previous work in the same topic and identifies the problem to be studied and finally comes with his research findings. The researcher provides citations for the literature he has reviewed and the unique methodology which was not covered in the previous research. By providing citations of previous research information ethics is complied but on the other hand if the researcher has verbatim taken material from the previous research, ethics is breached. Presently there is so much hype on online transactions, online media, e-paper, e-forms etc., There are multitude of challenges involved and as mentioned earlier they are specific to each organisation or domain and cannot be generalised.

3. CHALLENGES INVOLVED:

The first and foremost is protecting the information itself is a big challenge. Protecting the information means that information is not leaked before approval and is not transmitted freely. Technology advances have provided a method to bar the transmission of information Can information ethics be guaranteed? The answer is in the negative since a user can view and note it in his own handwriting and provide the information to others. Certainly this is against ethics but in order to prevent it use of pencil or writing books have to be discarded and a paperless environment needs to be created. Paperless is often stated easily than implemented. There are other surrounding factors which are to be looked into. In a country like India, where in there are power outages and not all the offices have the luxury of having backup power options works comes to a standstill. In order to avoid work stoppages, manual documents are being used. Even in the information technology sector, mid-range companies lack the wherewithal to adopt technology and go in for paperless office. They still have faith in paper based files considering the circumstances. Against this backdrop we need to evaluate the challenges in the digital era. Presently there are e-books, e-paper, e-news etc., and in all these instances there are multiple challenges. We need to balance between the requirement and what can be shared. This is a subjective assessment and needs appropriate technique to arrive at a conclusion. In government too, there are number of information which are circulated and do they need to follow information ethics. The answer is in the affirmative. But government being sovereign an individual cannot force them to comply with information ethics. In India, even under the Right To Information Act, certain types of information are excluded from the public and even if there is mismanagement in those departments, the society at large are precluded from obtaining the information. Information is a critical asset and protecting digital information is also very important. In case of print media, all newspapers publish the same news item but their captions are different. The content may or may not change but the presentation will vary. Hence we cannot term it as breach of information ethics since the caption and presentation are different..

The challenges involved are manifold and it cannot be woven into a straightjacket formula. Each information needs to be handled differently depending on its use, value of information and nature of information. In India we don't have standards for information ethics. The ISO standard very close to the subject matter of this paper is ISO 19600 relating to compliance management systems. In pharmaceutical sector they have their own ethics for handling information based on the guidelines issued by United States Food and Drug Administration (USFDA), if the product is certified for USFDA. ISO 27001 standard for information security can also be applied for handling and maintaining information ethics.

In India, the health data of the patients are not controlled by any enactment similar to US where Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) which is a specification for protecting information ethics about the patient's ailments. The important aspect of this specification is that it covers not only direct medical service providers but also their associates and vendors who are involved in treating patients. Large amount of patient data is being generated and used over a period of time. However there is no control to utilise the data in our country. Corporate governance includes information ethics also. But this aspect is not given wide attention and as a result information ethics are not adhered. Violation of trademarks and copyrights are examples of poor corporate governance. Confidentiality, Integrity and Availability of information do contribute to information ethics.

4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION:

There are no proven methods which are robust for information ethics. Each organisation and individual needs to handle the information with care and ensure that code of ethics is maintained. Professional bodies like chartered

accountants, cost accountants, company secretaries, bar council stipulate the minimum code of ethics for the professionals. But for a normal individual there are not set standards unless the employment contract provides for it. Even in employment contracts non-disclosure agreements are for specific period post the employment and information can be shared at a later point of time. Though this is a breach of information ethics penal action can be initiated based on unimpeachable evidence. This may amount to corporate espionage but standard of proof is higher to prove the same. International standards for information ethics needs to be evolved and should be made mandatory for all the organisations. For individuals, ethics should be based on the job profile. Digital information can be copied even if adequate controls are implemented. Technology has advanced to a large extent and this can monitor to prevent breach of information. Surveillance cameras are not the only solution and other methods like voice recording, minimising paper usage will also usher better handling of information and inculcate ethics. The biggest challenge is the human brain and information retained in the mind cannot be controlled and it can be transmitted at any point of time. This is individual based and it is for the individual to have self-imposed ethics. Organisations too should try to evolve ways to control the information flow. Else the information ethics will be a pipeline dream. Government and governmental agencies too should adhere to information ethics based on the set standards. To overcome the challenges and in order to maintain ethics of high standard, a digital authority should be constituted. This authority should have full control over all digital records, audit them and initiate action when there is a breach of ethics. However vulnerabilities do exist in any system and digital records can also get corrupted. Hence there should be a mechanism for backup and restoration of the files when required using unique identifiers. This adds cost to the digitisation process. The cost benefit analysis of digitisation vis-à-vis paper files will show not much difference since in order to maintain files rack space is required with suitable environmental set up. The main advantage that adds value to digitisation is that the paper records will be intact without an iota of damage. It is a tall order indeed, irrespective of technological advances to maintain highest standard of information ethics even in digital era.

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