

Computer Ethics

Computer ethics is a branch of practical philosophy which deals with how computing professionals should make decisions regarding professional and social conduct. The term "computer ethics" was first coined by Walter Maner in the mid-1970s, but only since the 1990s has it started being integrated into professional development programs in academic settings. The conceptual foundations of computer ethics are investigated by information ethics, a branch of philosophical ethics established by Luciano Floridi. Computer ethics is a very important topic in computer applications.

The importance of computer ethics increased through the 1990s. With the growth of the Internet, privacy issues as well as concerns regarding computing technologies such as spyware and web browser cookies have called into question ethical behavior in technology.

Identifying issues

Identifying ethical issues as they arise, as well as defining how to deal with them, has traditionally been problematic in computer ethics. Some have argued against the idea of computer ethics as a whole. However, Collins and Miller proposed a method of identifying issues in computer ethics in their Paramedic Ethics model. The model is a data-centered view of judging ethical issues, involving the gathering, analysis, negotiation, and judging of data about the issue.

In solving problems relating to ethical issues, Davis proposed a unique problem-solving method. In Davis's model, the ethical problem is stated, facts are checked, and a list of options are generated by considering relevant factors relating to the problem. The actual action taken is influenced by specific ethical standards.

Some questions in computer ethics

There are a number of questions that are frequently discussed under the rubric of computer ethics. One set of issues deal with some of the new ethical dilemmas that have emerged, or taken on new form, with the rise of the internet. For example, there is a wide range of behaviors that fall under the heading of "hacking" many of which have been variously defended and opposed by ethicists.

There are now many ways to gain information about others that were not available, or easily available, before the rise of computers. Thus ethical issues about information storage and retrieval are now in the forefront. How should we protect private data in large databases?

Questions about software piracy are also widely discussed, especially in light of file sharing programs such as Napster. Is it immoral or wrong to copy software, music, or movies? If so, why?

A second set of questions pertaining to the Internet that are becoming more widely discussed are questions relating to the values that some may wish to promote via the Internet. Some have claimed that the internet is a "democratic technology", or an e-democracy. But is it really? Does the Internet foster democracy? Should it? Does the digital divide raise ethical issues that society is morally obligated to ameliorate?

Ethical standards

One of the most definitive sets of ethical standards is the Association for Computing Machinery Code of Ethics. The code is a four-point standard governing ethical behavior among computing professionals. It covers the core set of computer ethics from professional responsibility to the consequences of technology in society.

Another computer ethics body is the British Computer Society, which has published a code of conduct and code of practice for computer professionals in the UK.

The Uniform Computer Information Transactions Act (UCITA) defines ethical behavior from the standpoint of legality, specifically during the contracting process of computing. It defines how valid computing contracts are formed, and how issues such as breach of contract are defined and settled. However, legality does not completely encompass computer ethics. It is just one facet of the constantly expanding field of computer ethics.

Code of Conduct

<http://www.bcs.org/server.php?show=nav.6030>

Code of Good Practice

<http://www.bcs.org/server.php?show=conWebDoc.1589>