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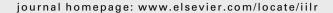
Rethinking information ethics education in Ghana: Is it adequate?

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Abstract This paper highlights the importance of information ethics and gives an overview of the various aspects of the subject taught at various institutions of higher learning in Ghana. The study notes that information ethics is not taught as a specific or whole subject at any level in the tertiary institutions and questions the depth of education given to students in the light of some serious information ethics violations such as plagiarism, copyright violation, cyber crime and social network abuses. Data for the study were collected mainly from the different university websites, university handbooks, course outlines as well as interviews with librarians and a few faculty members of the respective universities. The study recommends the introduction of information ethics as a university required course for all freshmen, a stand-alone course in information ethics at the Department of Information Studies, adequate sensitization programmes on academic integrity and plagiarism policies, and the enforcement of laws and polices in Ghana. These measures are meant to safeguard individual rights to ownership, privacy, confidentiality and security.
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Introduction

There is no doubt that the rapid advancement of information and communication technologies (ICT) has brought in its wake an information society capable of exploiting information resources for a wide range of activities such as education, business, leisure, entertainment and many more. Though information may be widely available, individuals need to be guided by ethical principles and values which should inform them as to who should use information, what information should be used, where information should be used, and when information should be used. This

sentiment is strongly supported by the Geneva's World Summit on Information Society (WSIS, 2003). While acknowledging the potential role of ICT in promoting sustainable development; increasing productivity; generating economic growth, job creation and employability; and improving the quality of life of all, the WSIS also cautions about the ethical use of information. The statement concerning the "Ethical Dimensions of the Information Society" reads as follows (WSIS, 2003, Section B10):

57. We acknowledge the importance of ethics for the Information Society, which should foster justice, and the dignity and worth of the human person. The widest possible protection should be accorded to the family and to enable it to play its crucial role in society.
58. The use of ICTs and content creation should respect human rights and fundamental freedoms of others,

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including personal privacy, and the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion in conformity with relevant international instruments.

59. All actors in the Information Society should take appropriate actions and preventive measures, as determined by law, against abusive uses of ICTs, such as illegal and other acts motivated by racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance, hatred, violence, all forms of child abuse, including paedophilia and child pornography, and trafficking in, and exploitation of, human beings.

The whole idea of thinking ethically around information is influenced by the desire to develop and sustain an information society. Ethics in society can be described as promoting what is good in people, averting chaos and providing norms and standards of behavior based on morals and values that are unifying (Ocholla, 2009). In other words, ethics is concerned with what is right or wrong, good or bad, fair or unfair, responsible or irresponsible, obligatory or permissible, praiseworthy or blameworthy (Online Ethics Center, 2006). Ethics ensures that an action that is designed to achieve a certain objective will do so without violating a value. The right or wrong actions people take are usually modeled around four major ethical theories described as consequences, duties, rights and virtues-based theories (Fallis, 2007). Fallis further argues that an understanding of these ethical theories is valuable as they all bear weight in information practice.

Relating ethics to information, Babik (2006) describes information ethics (IE) as a field that concerns all human activity related to information, in other words, our relationship with information, what we do with information, or how we generate, process and distribute information in the form of new technologies and innovations, which contain a great deal of processed information. Information ethics concerns all stages of information and communication processes. Thus, it should be regarded as a field of critical reflection on moral values and practices with regard to the production, storage, distribution and access to knowledge as well as to all kinds of processes, systems and media of information and communication.

According to Moore (2005), information ethics is the field that investigates the ethical issues arising from the development and application of information technologies. It provides a critical framework for considering moral issues concerning information privacy, moral agency (for example, whether artificial agents are moral), new environmental issues (especially how agents should behave in the infosphere) and problems arising from the life-cycle (creation, collection, recording, distribution, processing, etc.) of information, especially ownership and copyright in view of the digital divide.

The creation of the concept of information ethics has been credited to Koenig et al. (1981), Robert Hauptman, the founder of the *Journal of Information Ethics* and Rafael Capurro, who in 1988 published an article entitled "Informationethos und Informationethik" (Froehlich, 2004, as cited in Floridi 2008; Kaddu, 2009, chap. 35). The concept was used to discuss issues surrounding information (or data) confidentiality, reliability, quality and usage. It was not surprising that the concept evolved initially with library and information science and later was embraced by many other disciplines. Today, information ethics can be seen as a confluence of the ethical concerns of media, journalism, library and information science, computer ethics (including cyberethics), management information systems, business and the Internet (Froehlich, 2004). Information ethics has essentially become cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural. Issues of access and ownership, intellectual freedom, privacy and confidentiality, concerns with social equity and justice are among the areas that are overlapping in many disciplines. These areas also pose different ethical dilemmas not only for information professionals and knowledge workers but also for consumers of knowledge products and services. It is as a result of some of the underlying concerns of the appreciation of moral values, individual rights to ownership, privacy, confidentiality and security that information ethics education is very important.

A number of studies have been carried out on information ethics education (Buchanan, 2004; Carbo, 2004; Fleischmann, Robbins, & Wallace, 2009). Buchanan surveys ethics courses and their coverage in accredited schools of LIS in the United States. Major considerations of ethical issues such as privacy, censorship, aspects of intellectual freedom, information rich and poor are reflected in the majority of the syllabi. The courses reveal that information ethics is a complex and diverse field of study and for that matter, should not be incorporated into existing courses. A stand-alone course is recommended for LIS curricula. Carbo, on the other hand, discusses different models as well as challenges encountered in teaching information ethics to a very diverse student body at the University of Pittsburgh. A practical approach is adopted by Fleischmann et al. when they describe ten educational cases used in an information ethics course taught at the University of Maryland. The cases include having students face multiple interdependent decisions while playing culturally diverse roles. The findings of this research reveal preliminary evidence supporting four key themes for preparing students to confront intercultural information ethics dilemmas: diversity, perspectives, values, and pluralism. The conclusion of the research is that the educational case design can be successful used in preparing future information professionals to confront intercultural information ethics dilemmas.

IE education has become increasing important as advances in ICT have posed fundamental ethical questions. One such question is on the influence that ICT usage has on moral values. Capurro who has been championing this concern has called for a discourse on intercultural ethics regarding critical issues such as privacy, secrecy, intellectual property, online communities, mobile phones, etc. In his opinion, these issues vary in interpretation and relevance to local cultural, political and geographical settings. He calls on African educational and research institutions to reflect critically on these issues as they have the potential of undermining traditional cultural values (Capurro, 2010). Similar sentiments are also expressed by Brey (2009) when he investigates the descriptive cultural relativity of three values that are of significance to many studies in information ethics, namely, privacy, intellectual property and freedom of information. He concludes that significant differences exist among moral systems of different cultures and that these