

Information Ethics

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This entry provides a comprehensive description of information ethics, a concept applied to numerous domains, especially to ICT, library and information science, social epistemology, media and journalism. The first part of the entry provides a definition of information ethics by some key authors in the field and summarizes the history of this concept. Subsequently, I analyse the origins of information ethics, social epistemology, and the philosophy of information in Western philosophy, and then consider how their common themes are reflected in research in the fields of communication and journalism. Key concepts of information ethics are also analysed, such as (1) public space, (2) publicity and privacy, (3) freedom of expression and (4) truth. Concerns about digital evolution addressed by information ethics are considered in each concept. To conclude, some open questions for research are raised.

Ethics; journalism ethics; media ethics; disinformation; truth.

Information ethics deals with “ethical concerns of media, journalism, library and information science, computer ethics (including cyberethics), management information systems, business and the internet” (Frohelich, 2004). Its major concerns are “privacy, identity, trust, justice, intellectual property, cyberwar, the surveillance society, plagiarism, censorship, gender issues, and information overload” (Capurro, 2013, p.472). After establishing a broad definition of information ethics and tracing its historical milestones and roots in Western philosophy, the entry analyses this concept in terms of its application within the field of communication and journalism.

Information ethics: definition and historical evolution

The first concerns around ethics and information emerged in 1980, when Barbara J. Kostrewski and Charles Oppenheim wrote *Ethics in Information Science*, published in the Journal of information science (Frohelich, 2004). In 1985, two milestones in the field were published: Deborah Johnson’s handbook *Computer Ethics* and James Moor’s article *What is Computer Ethics?* (Bynum, 2010, pp.32-33).

The expression “information ethics”, however, appeared for the first time in Robert Hauptman’s *Ethical Challenges in Librarianship* in 1988 and in two articles by Rafael Capurro and by computer security expert Harry Demaio (Mathiesen, 2004, p.2).

During the 1990s, information ethics became an academic discipline, with specialized scientific journals and research centres. The debate on the philosophy of information developed thanks to John Wheeler, Rafael Capurro and Luciano Floridi (Bynum, 2010; Frohelich, 2004).

Floridi formulated a macroethics and non-anthropocentric theory based on the infosphere concept. His environmental approach was informed by the idea that every entity is “an informational object with at least a minimal moral worth” (Bynum, 2010, p.37), including those resulting from technology. His theory is acknowledged for developing a framework for the ethical analysis of non-human agents such as robots (Bynum, 2010, p.38).

The main critics of his theory include Kay Mathiesen (2004) and Rafael Capurro (2008b), the latter disagreeing with the fact that entities in the infosphere have intrinsic value (pp.168-169).

From an intercultural perspective, Capurro believes that the appropriation of ICT creates cultural and moral differences. Consequently, information ethics must understand and connect these cultural differences, according to the right to cultural diversity (Capurro, 2008a, p.649).

Mathiesen's theory is based on "information access states", where the access state is defined as "a relation between a person or persons and some information" (Mathiesen, 2004, p.2). She considers the importance of information for individuals. For her, information "must be capable [of being represented] and (...) of being understood (i.e., decoded) by some sentient being" (Mathiesen, 2004, p. 4). She does not focus on the value of information "*per se*", but rather on the value of the states of information access, with a valuable state being one that "promotes that person's (or group of persons) preferences or autonomy, well-being, virtue" (Mathiesen, 2004, pp.6-7). To her, even restricting access to information can be valuable, as is the case for protection of privacy (Mathiesen, 2004, p.8).

When referring to the media, the expression "information ethics" is sometimes used as a synonym for journalism or media ethics (Frohlich, 2004). In the French-speaking literature, however, information ethics is larger than media or journalism ethics. In fact, information ethics entails more than just placing "the responsibility for quality information solely on journalism professionals. It encompasses both dissemination and reception, implying a shared responsibility for both media outlets and the public" (Cornu, 2009, pp.16-17). For the Swiss philosopher, this helps to consider the broader social and political role of journalism in society.

In the following section, I address the origins of information ethics in Western philosophy, and present the main trends and challenges in contemporary research.

Origins in Western philosophy, contemporary research and challenges

Philosophy of information, information ethics and social epistemology are linked since they all deal with access, dissemination and understanding of information. They share key issues such as the public sphere, publicity and privacy, freedom of speech, and truth.

Their philosophical background is rooted in Western philosophy, and can be traced back to discussions on freedom of speech (*parrhesia*) in Ancient Greece (Capurro, 2013, p.471). After the Reformation and the invention of the printed press, the authority of political and religious power to dictate truth and information was challenged (Cornu, 2009; Capurro, 2013), providing alternative ways to access truth and amass knowledge. During the Enlightenment, reflections about censorship and freedom of speech contributed greatly to making knowledge more accessible (Capurro, 2013, p.472).

These values, rooted in Western democracies, are challenged by digitalization: this is the meeting point of information ethics, philosophy of information and social epistemology. The evolution of the public sphere therefore challenges access to information and blurs the boundaries between publicity and privacy. Although freedom of speech seems unlimited, it must be regulated to protect people from harmful speech or misinformation.

The concept of the public sphere was developed by Jürgen Habermas, but its roots can be found in Kantian philosophy. Kant states that the enlightenment can be accomplished through the public use of reason, which helps “disseminate ‘the spirit’ of critical thinking” and “contribute to public deliberation on law and politics” (Maliks, 2014, p.4). This public sphere is also rooted in moral autonomy linked to external freedom from the choices of others (Maliks, 2014, p. 13). Publicity is a key requirement: no action conforms to morality or law if its principles are not publicly discussed. This idea of publicity lays the foundations for policy accountability and gives the press the role of relay (Cornu, 2009, pp.170-171).

In the 20th century, Habermas theorized the *bourgeois public sphere* “as the sphere of private individuals assembled into a public body, which almost immediately laid claim to the officially regulated ‘intellectual newspapers’ for use against the public authority itself” (Habermas, 1974, p.52). Resulting from the rise of the bourgeois society, this Liberal Model of the Public Sphere saw the press as an institution for debate and discussion (Habermas, 1974, p.53).

After the consolidation of the welfare state, the public sphere became “a field for the competition of interests” where its critical functions weakened (Habermas, 1974, pp.54-55). In fact, Habermas argues that a “public body of private individuals” who used to participate in the process of public communication has been replaced by a “public body of organized private individuals” (p.55). For the author, this implies a reorganization of the public sphere on the basis of mutual control of groups with divergent interests (Habermas, 1974, p.55).

While his theory has evolved over the years and has been largely criticized (mostly by Niklas Luhmann, Nancy Fraser and Louis Quéré, but also by Catherine Squires for a Black Public Sphere), it remains the most influential theory of the 20th century.

When looking at the consequences of digitalization on the public sphere, Habermas (2022) claims that social networks are semi-private and semi-public communication spaces that blur boundaries between public and private spheres. These spaces are detached from the traditional public sphere, look self-referential and exclude any different opinion. The political public sphere therefore becomes just another semi-public sphere and loses its ability to aid discursive clarification (Habermas, 2022, pp. 165-166). In this context, the media is losing its gatekeeping role while being replaced by platforms. Journalism is no longer debating politics, but just managing and disseminating information (Jarren & Fischer, 2021, cited by Habermas, 2022, p.164).

For Van Dyk (2022), this has consequences for democracy: “threats” coming from authoritarian neoliberalism and populism erode “the preconditions for fact-based political contestation as the essence of democracy” (p. 48). The fundamental nature of truth is no longer guided by accountability and verification, but by immediate sharing and endorsement of the majority (van Dyk, 2022, p.42).

Other scholars, such as Christopher W. Anderson (2023) criticize some aspects of the public sphere theory, notably arguing that the internet is not a public sphere (p.21). However, he also suggests adapting Habermasian philosophical principles to reflect on questions of racial justice and disinformation in contemporary societies (p.22). Another interesting contribution comes from Axel Bruns (2023): opposed to the Habermasian vision, he provides an empirically founded model to conceptualize the “building blocks of the contemporary

communicative environment” (p. 76). This environment is composed of networked structures and his model aligns with new platform realities.

When addressing the public sphere, the distinction between public and private is a key concept. The notion of privacy is rooted in John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*, which warned against a collective opinion or the State intervening in the private sphere (the tyranny of the majority). The State could only intervene to prevent harm. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt argues that society has replaced the political sphere with the social sphere. In Ancient Greece, the public and political spheres coincided and were concerned with liberty, while the private sphere implied necessity. According to her, with the development of society, family economics and household activity have been taken over by the public domain and social groups. Consequently, when society imposed rules and behaviours, it also excluded the possibility of action, thus leading to a degradation of democracy, where action is relegated to the private sphere.

Although acknowledged in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention of Human Rights, privacy started to be discussed as a right in academia in the 1980s, particularly by Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis, who argued for a legal right to privacy (Sanders, 2003, p.80).

Nowadays, broader or narrower conceptions of privacy exist, but in general, privacy is related to identity, autonomy and dignity (Sanders, 2003, p.78). In journalism, privacy is both a right for citizens and a duty for the journalist, who must balance privacy and public interest. As demonstrated by the Covid-19 outbreak, privacy became a matter of dignity in reporting on death and disease, especially when journalists needed to contextualize tracking policies during health emergencies¹. Contemporary approaches in philosophy evaluate the long-term risks of surveillance in democracy linked to modern technologies (Stahl, 2020). Finally, information ethics deals with privacy policies in social networks, the use of personal data, and AI.

The case of journalism clearly illustrates the necessary balance to be found between freedom of speech and protection of privacy. Two main approaches to freedom of speech exist: (1) the

¹ The guidelines for ethical reporting emanating from the International Journalists’ Network on this subject is worth mentioning. <https://ijnet.org/en/story/ethical-considerations-reporting-covid-19>

liberal perspective postulates that truth can be reached by debating ideas and that it will prevail in the free market of ideas. The State must not therefore restrict freedom of speech, a principle enshrined in the First Amendment to the US Constitution (1791). The second approach (2) recognizes freedom of speech and argues that the State should implement it in society and prevent abuses, as shown in the European Convention on Human Rights. Freedom of speech therefore comes with duties and responsibilities and can be subject to restrictions provided by law. While the American formulation underpins a sense of responsibility of a moral nature, the European text legitimizes restrictions of freedom based on responsibility, which is integrated into freedom of speech (Cornu, 2009, pp.161-163).

The main problem is how to limit freedom of speech in digital environments, related to hate speech and information disorders. As regards hate speech, no agreed definition exists and research in the field is still fragmented or too focused on English-language speech. However, research is now focusing on ways of contrasting online hate speech and their efficacy (Siegel, 2020).

In the case of dis/misinformation, restrictions imposed by political power may be negatively viewed, as exemplified by laws combating fake news during the electoral period, as promulgated in 2018 in France. However, some theoretical frameworks do not consider censorship of disinformation as a breach of freedom of speech (Mathiesen, 2019). Her theory, based on normative value interests of freedom of communication (autonomy, utility, democracy), suggests lines of enquiry about ethical guidelines for media policy and self-regulation.

This leads to an analysis of the relationship with truth within the ethics of information. Truth is examined by various philosophical theories. Truth in a digital environment is linked to mis/disinformation. While no agreed definition exists, the most popular typology of Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) distinguishes between three types, phases and elements of information disorders. The concept is also addressed in Journalism Studies in relation to journalistic roles and within the branch devoted to journalism ethics, as truth is the foremost value for journalists.

While most of the literature in the domain comes from the Western world, some authors have been reflecting on information ethics in other cultural contexts. This is the case for Nishigaki,

who links technology and ethics in the perspective of Buddhist philosophy (cited by Capurro, 2008a). Advocating for Intercultural Information Ethics, Capurro (2008a) provides a broad literary review of authors having addressed the effects of globalization and technology on local culture, in an international perspective.

Open questions and further avenues for research

This entry has shown that information ethics can be interpreted either narrowly or broadly. Research and the topics discussed here show that comparative and cross-disciplinary studies could be interesting in the field. For this, philosophy of information and social epistemology could provide theoretical framework to communication and journalism ethics.

Furthermore, information ethics should pay attention to future developments of international initiatives in the field: the forthcoming European Media Freedom Act and EU Artificial Intelligence Act might be an interesting case study. Monitoring of existing policy (e.g. the Digital Services Act in the EU) would also be useful. In this sense, the New Transparency Centre publishing data from the signatories of the Code of Practice on Disinformation could prove beneficial.

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