



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Organisation
des Nations Unies
pour l'éducation,
la science et la culture

Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация
Объединенных Наций по
вопросам образования,
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

UNESCO and Info-Ethics

The exponential growth of the Internet and other emerging technologies enable more and more of us to increase our interaction and to generate and acquire information. But ethical concerns – not least the issue of free and unhindered access – remain very much on the agenda.

The role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in our everyday life is not only increasing but constantly evolving, opening up new horizons in education and learning, employment opportunities, social and political interaction. This creates new opportunities and encourages self-determination, but it also poses challenges. The international debate on information ethics (info-ethics) addresses the ethical, legal and societal aspects of the applications of ICT.

The principles on which info-ethics are based derive from the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and include the right to freedom of expression, universal access to information, particularly that which is in the public domain, the right to education, the right to privacy and the right to participate in cultural life.

Promoting values and principles based on fundamental human rights is therefore central for the development of an equitable information society

Digital Inclusion: A Key Challenge

One of the most challenging ethical issues is inequity of access to ICT between countries, between urban and rural communities within countries and between generations.

UNESCO promotes universal access to ICT as a key strategy for ensuring access to information and knowledge according to universally accepted ethical principles and values such as: the free flow of ideas; maintenance, increase and diffusion of knowledge; furthering universal respect of rule of law, human dignity, human rights and fundamental freedoms.

In close cooperation with its Member States, UNESCO supports and promotes the ethical dimensions of the information society, which is one of the priorities of the Organization in its overall effort to implement the decisions of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

Free and unhindered access to information on the interactive networks remains a key goal, raising various ethical issues such as privacy protection, safety of children, and participation of persons with disabilities, amongst others, that require the attention of the international community. Fostering the quality and reliability of information resources on these networks is an endeavour that can be carried out only with the participation of all stakeholders, from the private and public sectors as well as civil society.

Issues to be Addressed

Innovation and social evolution spurred by technological changes, globalization, knowledge creation and other factors ensures that new issues will continue to arise. Contemporary ethical issues and concerns involve a range of topics, roles and policy questions in fields as varied as privacy, intellectual property, public domain and fair use, open standards, Internet governance, role of internet intermediaries, filtering, blocking and censorship, quality of content and others that influence choices, perceptions and shape our collective reality.

These ethical questions often require the balancing of conflicting interests. For example, researchers indicate that over 75% of e-mail traffic consists of indiscriminately sent, unsolicited bulk messages known as spam. Most users are not aware of the magnitude of spam as automated filters often remove much of this from the network. Content in the form of news items and search results may also be selectively channeled to a user based on prior choices and preferences. This may result in a narrowing of the information that they receive. These filters are not perfect and may misclassify content. Such filtering of content may distort the user's concept of reality and may impinge on their ability to exercise certain human rights.



© iStockphoto.com

Another example relates to UNESCO's objective to enhance human **diversity** in all its forms, including cultural and linguistic diversity, both tangible and intangible.

The preservation of the richness and diversity of our universal human heritage are concepts that are enshrined in different international texts and national constitutions and legislations.

These long-standing principles have to be reaffirmed and applied in cyberspace. Much remains to be done to address these and other important issues. They have implications for public policy, professional practice and personal

Info-ethics is one of the five priorities of the Information for All Programme of UNESCO (IFAP). At the request of some Member States, UNESCO contributed to the development of a Code of Ethics for the information society which resulted

UNESCO's Action to Promote Info-ethics:

- Follow-up on the declarations and recommendations of four regional conferences organized and supported by UNESCO on information ethics; promotion of the outcomes of these meetings and further reflection;
- Promotion of freedom of access to official information and support for access to governmental public domain information;
- Encouraging the use of the IFAP publication on the *"Ethical Implications of Emerging Technologies: A Survey"*;
- Integrating information ethics into mainstream discussions on ethics;
- Training on info-ethics and e-government;
- Awareness-raising on the ethical dimensions of the use of ICT;
- Encouragement of research on the ethical dimensions of ICT by relevant stakeholders, especially in academia.

decisions. It is important to increase awareness among decision-makers and all other major stakeholders about these ethical dimensions and their social implications. Only when there is a real awareness of the ethical dimension of the information society, will it be possible to acknowledge and promote such basic values and principles within the information society as peace and democracy, the free flow of information, freedom of expression, tolerance, cultural diversity, shared responsibility, solidarity and informed consent.

UNESCO's Role

UNESCO is committed to the full implementation of the fundamental freedoms proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other universally adopted international legal instruments. UNESCO is the recognized leader within the UN System for promoting the free, editorially independent and pluralistic media as a necessary element of the implementation of the Article 19 of the UDHR on the right to freedom of opinion and expression and for promoting the free flow of information by word and image.

A frontier-free information society provides almost unlimited opportunities for the practical implementation of Article 19, but it also poses great challenges, especially in relation to the protection of privacy and human dignity.

Since 1997, UNESCO has initiated a series of events enabling specialists and decision-makers to address the ethical dimensions of the information society.

from various regional Info-Ethics meetings.

The Info-Ethics regional events for Africa, Asia and the Pacific Region, Europe, Latin America, and North Africa also contributed to improving awareness of the challenges of the ethics of information. They helped to establish criteria for assessing, at national and regional levels, ways of enhancing the debate and the decision-making process on the major ethical issues and consequently for the need to undertake efforts to develop coherent. These events led to strengthened international cooperation and the design and implementation of pilot national, regional and inter-regional initiatives in this field, such as the establishment of the African Network for Information Ethics (ANIE), which is advancing research and university teaching in information ethics.

It is mainly through such regional and international consultations that these far-reaching objectives can be publicized. UNESCO, in close cooperation with its members and partners, will continue to provide opportunities and support for such regional and inter-regional platforms and exchange of best practice.

Thanks to existing and newly created synergies, UNESCO will seek to play an even more crucial role in this important area in order to meet the constantly growing needs and legitimate expectations of people for justice and fair dealing in the information age.