

Ethics of social Information Systems

The belief that our environment and in particular our society should be actively and continuously developed is something distinct to modern western society. Prior and outside to the west, social order has always been considered as something Good-given and unchangeable rather than an opportunity for active design. While traditional societies have looked upon change as a danger to society – and considered it as the responsibility of the government to prevent it – social functional differentiation has become the result as well as the enabler of rapid development in modern societies. The political system, the education system or the economical system of society emerged on the micro, meso and macro level to answer specific needs of society; however, all rely on media to preserve, spread and process information. The role of media is increasingly played by rapidly evolving social Information Systems. Modern social Information Systems reduce contingency and provide reference for future communication to all other social systems while their own design is widely contingent. Research on Information Systems is mainly characterized by behavioral science and design science. Design science contributes problem solving by creating innovations in terms of ideas, practices and capabilities. These innovations are then often studied by behavioral science to develop laws and principles that explain and predict their use. However, given the ubiquity, impact and the speed of change modern Information Systems bring to almost all functional social systems it is surprising how little has been published on the relationship of ethics and social Information Systems.

We will begin this work by reviewing existing literature on the ethics of social Information Systems including neighboring fields such as business ethics. In the next step we will distill the unique characteristics of moral norms touched by social Information Systems as well as the specifics of their ethical reflection. To do so three levels are to be distinguished: the micro level of the individual, the meso level of organizations, and the macro level of the society as a whole. These three levels of consideration correspond to personal, collective and general norms.

To allow the primacy of practice over theory special emphasis will be drawn to corporate Information Systems and the role of social Information Systems in journalism as exemplary usage scenarios. We see the role of Information Systems ethics as a critical as well as constructive. Social Information Systems ethics must not criticize for the sake of criticism but it ought to provide new perspectives. However, this requires a new thinking about what rationality in Information Systems and ethics are, as well as how they can eventually be integrated. There are problems such as: the meaning of social Information Systems and ethics, or how their relationship is determined? Do they have any common ground? And what is the relationship between theory and praxis? We can not expect to achieve a generally accepted profile of social Information Systems ethics. However, to study the interdependence of Information Systems and our moral norms as well as enable their active responsible development it is at least of importance to evaluate the potential of minimum consensus on social Information Systems ethics.