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# In search of a code of global information ethics: The road travelled and new horizons

*This paper reports on international activities undertaken particularly under the patronage of UNESCO in order to develop a code of ethics for the information society. Since the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) the urgency for such a code has become manifest. Several regional conferences and declarations in Africa, Asia-Pacific, Latin America and Europe have taken place in line with the Plan of Action of the WSIS on global information ethics. According to the authors, these goals and activities should not be confused with a global dialogue on information ethics understood as a permanent critical examination of ethical issues of information societies. This difference between a global code of ethics and a global discussion of ethical issues that takes particularly into consideration intercultural issues is briefly addressed in the conclusion.*

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to give an account of recent activities in search of a code of global information ethics, particularly related to several regional conferences and declarations under the patronage of UNESCO as contributions to the information society. Such a code makes sense only if it is the product of a patient and collaborative work between different regions and cultures taking into consideration their commonalities, but also respecting their differences and priorities with regard to ethical principles and values. A paradigmatic example of such a code is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), as well as other international declarations, such as the Oviedo Declaration on

Human Rights in relation to Biology and Medicine (Oviedo 1997) and the Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and the Rights of Man adopted by UNESCO in 1997 (UNESCO 1997). There are also examples of such declarations issued by non-governmental institutions, such as the Principles of a Global Ethics by the Global Ethics Foundation (2009) based on the ideas and commitment of the theologian Hans Küng.

The ethical dimensions of the global information society became part of the UNESCO agenda. Since 1997, UNESCO initiated a series of events enabling specialists and decision-makers to address the ethical dimensions of the information society. The main goal of the UNESCO INFOethics Congresses, organised in 1997, 1998 and in 2000, was to stimulate reflection and debate on the ethical, legal and societal aspects of the information society by bringing together participants from the largest possible number of countries representing the widest range of educational, scientific, cultural and social environments. The ethical, legal and societal implications of information and communication technologies (ICTs) are also one of the three priorities of UNESCO's Information for All Programme (IFAP).

At both the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) meetings held in Geneva (December 2003) and Tunis (November 2005) the debate on the ethical dimensions and challenges facing the global information society received very specific attention. Following the first meeting in Geneva two relevant documents were published, namely the Declaration of Principles and the Plan of Action. The second summit in Tunis agreed on two further documents, namely the Tunis Commitment and the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society (WSIS 2003/2005). In paragraphs 55-56, the Declaration of Principles clarifies the ethical dimensions of the information society. In this document it is stated amongst others that the global information society must uphold the fundamental values of human freedom:

- human rights should be respected;
- there should be no abusive use of modern ICTs.

Part C10 of the Plan of Action furthermore states that 'the Information Society should be subject to universally held values and promote the common good and to prevent abusive uses of ICTs' (par. 25). It declares a number of actions including:

- all stakeholders should increase the awareness of the ethical dimensions of the information society;
- all actors in the information society should promote the common good;
- stakeholders, including academia, are invited to continue research on the ethical dimensions of ICTs.

In the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society this specific commitment to the Geneva Declaration of Principles as well as the Action Plan were confirmed (WSIS 2003/2005). In 2003, the UNESCO General Conference adopted the recommendation on the 'Promotion and use of multilingualism and universal access to cyberspace'. It stated that 'Member States and international organisations should recognise and support universal access to the internet as an instrument for promoting the realisation of the human rights as defined in Articles 19 and 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights' (UNESCO 2003). One important aim of UNESCO in this field is to adopt a Global Code of Ethics based on regional discussions and agreements. Since then, several regional meetings under the patronage of UNESCO have taken place. It is against this background that we propose to interpret a variety of global information ethics initiatives spearheaded by the International Center for Information Ethics (ICIE) and other academic institutions.

### From Karlsruhe to Tshwane and Magaliesburg
*Karlsruhe 2004*
The first initiative was an international symposium on information ethics held in 2004 in Karlsruhe, Germany. It was organised by the ICIE and sponsored by the Volkswagen Foundation. Leading international experts in the field of information ethics from countries all over the world – namely Argentina, Austria, Cameroon, Canada, China, Croatia, Dominican Republic, France, Germany, Greece, India, Israel, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom and the United States – were invited to participate. The symposium, the first of its kind in the world, also brought together experts with different scientific and professional backgrounds, such as computer science, library and information science, media studies, engineering, management, economics, and law. What made this meeting particularly unique was its dealing with a highly relevant technological phenomenon, namely the internet, from an ethical *and* intercultural perspective. The intertwining of these perspectives is now called intercultural information ethics (Wong 2009,

Carbo and Smith 2008, Hongladarom and Ess 2007, Brey 2007).

Although this was the first international meeting focusing on this matter, it is important to recall other international conferences such as CATaC (Cultural Attitudes Towards Technology and Communication), ETHICOMP (Ethics and Computing) and CEPE (Computer Ethics: Philosophical Enquiry) where information ethics issues have been addressed since the middle to end of the 1990s.

How is the embodiment of human life possible within local cultural traditions and the horizon of a global digital environment? This symposium introduced these questions from three perspectives:

- internet for social and political development: community building;
- internet for cultural development: restructuring the media;
- internet for economic development: empowering the people.

The ethical perspective on intercultural aspects of the global digital network is a normative as well as a formative one. The symposium addressed the question of how people with different cultural backgrounds integrate the internet into their lives. This concerns:

- Firstly the question of community building was considered. How far does the internet affect, for better or worse, local community building? How far does it allow democratic consultation? How do people construct their lives within this medium? How does it affect their customs, languages and everyday problems? The question about information justice is thus not just an issue of giving everybody access to the global network (a utopian goal?), but rather an issue of how the digital network helps people to better manage their lives while avoiding the dangers of exploitation and discrimination.

- Secondly, the symposium dealt with the changes produced by the internet in traditional media, such as oral and written customs, newspapers, radio and television, the merger of mass media, the telephone and the internet, and the impact of the internet on literary culture. The symposium also reflected on the next generation of information and communication technologies, such as ubiquitous computing

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and on what might be called the post-internet era. This aspect of the ethical question focuses on new methods of manipulation and control made possible or aggravated by the internet.

- Finally, the question of the economic impact of the internet was addressed. Is it a medium that opens up opportunities for economic development? Or is it an instrument of oppression and colonialism? What is the impact of this technology on the environment? How does it affect what has been called cultural memory or cultural sustainability?

The proceedings of the ICIE symposium were published in the *International Review of Information Ethics* (IRIE 2004) as well as in Capurro et al. (2007).

*Tshwane 2007*
At the symposium in Karlsruhe it became clear that the African continent was not well represented in the field. There were only two Africans in attendance, both expatriates. In debating the reasons for the lack of African scholars, it became clear that there were many possible reasons. Some relate to the mere fact that many African scholars are unknown to other international scholars and as a consequence were not invited to attend. Lack of funding to attend international events was also a stumbling block, as was difficulty in obtaining visas to travel. Last, but not least, not many African scholars were doing research on this very important topic. Based on the sheer numbers or lack of numbers of scholarly publications, it seemed that African scholars did not have much to offer their global counterparts on the ethical challenges facing Africa in the era of globalization. Rafael Capurro did a search on publications related to African information ethics by African scholars and came across a limited number of publications (Capurro in ANIE n.d.).

The authors of this article concluded that that there was and still is indeed an urgent need to integrate leading African scholars into the international ethics debate on the impact of new information and communication technologies in Africa. The first ever Africa Information Ethics Conference that took place 5-7 February 2007 in Tshwane, South Africa was also conceived and planned as part of the implementation of Action Line C10 of the Geneva Plan of Action, thanks to the financial support

of the South African Department of Communications under the auspices of UNESCO. More than 90 scholars representing more than 20 countries attended, most of them from Africa. The theme of the conference was 'The Joy of Sharing Knowledge'. The conference covered several topics including:

- respect for human dignity, information-based rights;
- freedom of expression;
- freedom of access to information;
- information wrongdoings, information corruption, information injustice;
- cultural diversity and globalisation;
- protection and promotion of indigenous knowledge;
- global security, human security, privacy, transparency;
- e-government and related topics;
- cultural diversity and development;
- using ICTs for a better life in Africa: case studies;
- internet and exclusion (socio-political and economic exclusion);
- North-South flow of information and information imperialism;
- brain drain in Africa.

The proceedings were published in the *International Review of Information Ethics* (IRIE 2007) as well as a book *The Africa reader of information ethics* (Capurro et al. 2010) with a selection of papers. The attendees agreed to form a network of professionals interested in information ethics from an African perspective. The Africa Network for Information Ethics (ANIE) was soon created. The participants of the Africa conference adopted the Tshwane Declaration on Information Ethics in Africa.

*Magaliesburg 2009*
Based on the experience and input of the participants of the Tshwane conference, several areas of potential cooperation with UNESCO were identified that would not only put the outcomes of the conference into effect, but also place the outcomes in the international context facilitated by UNESCO. One area related to the ethical dimensions of the implementation of e-government in Africa. The WSIS Declaration and Action Plan, for example, expressed the need for governments to implement e-government systems to facilitate administrative activities and deliver services to their citizens. It is true that Africa has embarked on the e-government road with many e-government projects, and NEPAD (the New Partnership for Africa's Development) has launched an e-government initiative urging

African governments to implement e-government projects.

E-government has, therefore, become an important goal in Africa. Countries including South Africa, Egypt, Nigeria and Mauritius have invested in e-government projects and the training of people to implement these projects. During the Tshwane conference it became evident that little attention had been given to the ethical dimensions of that activity. This led to the planning of an e-government and ethics workshop for African government officials. The three-day workshop, sponsored by UNESCO, the South African Department of Communications and SAP Systems took place from 23 to 26 February, 2009 in Magaliesburg, South Africa (UNESCO 2009). The workshop was co-organised by the International Center for Information Ethics, the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and the University of Pretoria. The main focus areas included privacy, access and accessibility of information, building of trust and information corruption. Future workshops are planned for individual African countries. UNESCO underlined the relevance of this initiative as follows:

> This e-government and information ethics initiative in Africa aims to significantly improve the quantity and quality of government services provided to the public, businesses and the civil society over those provided by traditional methods. This objective could be reached through simplifying, streamlining and speeding up the processes of applying for and securing entitlement. It is also important to ensure that the benefits and services required are delivered on time, accurately and completely, without compromising legal and ethical norms such as openness and fairness in bidding policies and procedures.

> Another objective of this initiative is to incorporate greater transparency into the provision of government products and services to the public and businesses. It requires making information on the availability of those services more complete and pro-actively accessible to both the media and the public. Therefore, all elements of the society will be better informed and educated about what is being offered precisely; when and how to obtain those services; and how to ensure that promised services are, in fact, delivered (UNESCO 2009).

In their final report, the academic steering committee – Rafael Capurro (project leader), Johannes Britz, Toni Carbo, F.W. Horton, Jr., Theo Bothma and Coetzee Bester – underlined that the central focus of e-government in Africa should be on helping to accomplish development goals and objectives, which include improving the quality of life of individuals and families, strengthening institutions in both the private and public sectors, and enlarging the role of elements of civil society, so that civil society can partner more effectively with the other elements of the public sector and with the private sector. Development, in short, encompasses not just social and cultural goals, but governance/political and economic, business and industry strengthening as well. All sectors of an African society are embraced by development goals and objectives. If an e-government team is considering an application that cannot be linked more or less directly to a development goal or objective, in all likelihood it should be accorded a lower-ranked priority.

The accurate identification of, and inclusion of all stakeholders in e-government visions, mission statements, policies, plans and strategies is essential. Starting at the most local level, referring first to institutions and organisations with existing groups, whether formal or informal, and then extending upwards to provincial/state, then national, then sub-regional, then regional, and, finally in some instances, even international stakeholders (e.g. international intergovernmental organisations such as ITU, UNESCO, WIPO, UNDP). Even international non-governmental organisations such as the International Federation of Information Processing Societies (IFIPS), the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), and others should be identified and included.

Inclusivity does not just refer to institutions and organisations, but it also refers to sub-populations that have special needs. For example, ensuring the inclusion of both women and men, youth (girls and boys), diverse linguistic and cultural groups, elders, people with disabilities, literate and illiterate people, the unemployed, underemployed and migrant populations, minority ethnic, racial and religious groups, and so on. While women are often active participants in the workplace and in local communities, they are too often unable to read and write, and are not always fully included in decision-making by governments.

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According to the Academic Steering Committee, emphasis should be placed on utilising existing technologies and traditions (such as storytelling, radio, 'word of mouth' sharing – for example during taxi rides, information talks at local gathering places) as a starting point. Sometimes this has been referred to as the 'information and communication culture'. Existing resources, such as paper documents, can be transformed into learning tools, and presented via radio or oral demonstrations with the community, for example, using the simplest tools, technologies and other capabilities such as the human voice, hand signals, or radio.

All documents of this meeting are available at the Africa Information Ethics and E-Government Portal (www.africainfoethics.org, Africa E-Gov-Portal 2009).

*Santo Domingo 2006*
The first regional Latin American conference on information ethics took place from December 6-9, 2006 in Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic under the patronage of UNESCO and was organised in cooperation with the National Commission for UNESCO, the Permanent Delegation to UNESCO of the Dominican Republic and the Fundación Global Democracia y Desarrollo (FUNGLODE) (UNESCO 2006, FUNGLODE 2008). Experts from some ten countries discussed issues of accessibility, confidentiality, intellectual property rights, the promotion of respect for fundamental values and principles, increasing awareness of information ethics and strategies and policies with respect to the protection of privacy, personal data, and preventive measures against illegal use of ICTs. A declaration on the ethical dimensions of the information society (Declaración de Santo Domingo) was adopted by the participants. It underlined the following goals and values:

- to promote peace and respect fundamental values such as liberty, equality, solidarity, tolerance and shared responsibility;
- to promote the awareness on the ethical dimension of ICTs;
- to avoid abusive use of ICTs and to promote the respect for privacy and personal data;
- to promote equal access to information and knowledge considering their impact on the economic, social, and cultural development of the society;
- to promote the responsible use of ICTs and other communication media according to the best professional and ethical standards;

- to improve the access and responsible autonomous use of ICTs by young generations;
- to take all measures in order to allow an equitable access to ICTs encouraging young people to debate on ethical aspects of the information society;
- to coordinate political and administrative action at all levels in order to promote the debate on ethics and information;
- to support all activities related to the implementation of the Geneva Plan of Action particularly the ones established in Line C10.

The conference goal was to create conditions for enhancing the visibility of, and the interest for, information ethics issues among member states from the region. It was one of the first concrete follow-up actions to implementing Action Line C10 'Ethical Dimensions of the Information Society' of the Geneva Action Plan adopted by WSIS.

In the aftermath of this conference, a Latin America portal on information ethics, the Red universitaria de ética en el ciberespacio, was created. Two years later another academic network dealing with information ethics *research* in Latin America, the Red Latinoamericana de etica de la información (RELEI), was established. In this context the extensive work done by the community Metodología e Impacto Social de las Tecnologías de la Información y de la Comunicación en América (MISTICA) should not be forgotten, particularly its final document, 'Working the Internet with a Social Vision' (MISTICA 2002).[1]

*Hanoi 2008*
The Vietnam National Commission for UNESCO, in cooperation with UNESCO and other partners, organised the first Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific on the Ethical Dimensions of the Information Society, from 12 to 14 March 2008 in Hanoi, Vietnam. According to UNESCO: 'This conference was an important step towards capturing the full potential of the information and communication revolution for development. It is also a significant forum for participants to discuss issues such as accessibility, confidentiality, privacy, diversity and respect of fundamental human values' (UNESCO 2008). About 70 participants, including representatives of government bodies, national commissions for UNESCO, civil society, the private sector, and representatives of UNESCO field offices and headquarters, attended the event. The conference objectives were to:

- identify and discuss the issues considered priorities for the Asia-Pacific region in the field of ethics of information and communication;
- raise stakeholders' awareness of the ethical, legal and socio-economic dimensions of information and communication technologies;
- create a regional network of experts in this field and promote regional and inter-regional cooperation on information ethics;
- contribute with the organisation of this regional conference, and subsequently through the action plan that could be drafted on this occasion, to the implementation of the WSIS Action Line C10 on the Ethical Dimensions of the Information Society, facilitated by UNESCO;
- contribute to the UNESCO Draft Code of Ethics initiative (elaborated and discussed during the three previous regional conferences);
- further promote UNESCO's mission and commitment to ensuring sustainable development, peace and progress thanks to access to knowledge and increased use of ICTs.

The participants of the conference convened and agreed on a set of priorities for the region regarding the following themes: universal access to information, freedom of expression, and lastly, privacy and personal protection. They issued a statement on information ethics as a contribution to UNESCO's Code of Ethics.

*Strasbourg 2007*
A regional European meeting on ethics and human rights in the information society was organised by UNESCO together with the French Commission for UNESCO and the Council of Europe. It took place in Strasbourg from 13 to 14 September 2007 and included participants from Europe and from the United States (UNESCO 2007a). The purpose of this meeting was to discuss and identify the issues considered to be priorities for the European region and to raise stakeholders' awareness of the ethical issues of information and communication technologies and usages. It was based around four thematic round tables which were structured around three main pillars:

- analysis of the opportunities offered by ICTs;
- side-effects, negative impacts and possible conflicts of interest;
- recommendations with the aim of contributing to internet governance founded on the involvement of all stakeholders and the sharing of responsibilities.

**Conclusion**
The regional declarations are *prima facie* similar with regard, for instance, to the values and principles as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But if one makes a thorough analysis, to which we can only briefly point now, it is evident that most of the issues can and will be understood differently according to different cultural frameworks. One clear example of this relativity of interpretations and relevance is privacy that plays a major role in Western countries, but is differently understood within, for example, Buddhist traditions. This is not to say that, on the one hand, common terms are necessarily equivocal or that it is not possible to find either a common ground for values and principles as long as cultures are not considered as closed worlds. But, on the other hand, it is evident that issues such as solidarity, social justice or indigenous knowledge play a more important role in some regions of the world than in others.

The principles of autonomy and human dignity are more related to Western traditions. Universality of access and multilingualism might also raise different questions according to cultural and political settings. The issue of 'deviant behaviour' addressed in the Hanoi declaration might also be interpreted differently according to different moral and legal standards. In other words, an Ethics Declaration for the Information Society is possible and necessary in order to have a common ground for dealing with global issues, but it presupposes a deep and sustainable analysis and critical discussion of the issues at stake.

In his 1985 article, 'The quest for a code of professional ethics: An intellectual and moral confusion', the American philosopher John Ladd argues that the very idea of a code of ethics is a contradiction since ethics is essentially problematic (Ladd 1985). What can be codified are ethical principles as the temporary result of argumentation, not established by consensus or decision-making. Codes of practice, if one wants to avoid the misleading formulation 'code of ethics', have pros and cons as Ladd remarks, taking as an example the case of professional codes. They can inspire ethical conduct in professionals, but they can give them also a sense of complacency, covering up even irresponsible conduct. In some cases they are a defence mechanism diverting the attention from the real macro- and micro-ethical problems of the profession.

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If this is the case for professional groups, it is no less the case for society as a whole or even for the global society. The ethical challenge is not just to establish a global code of ethics, but to promote a (global) discussion on ethical issues. These issues are not only too complex to be reduced to general principles, but also are subject to interpretation in their practice (Schwarz 1979). Such a code or canon of apparently unequivocal dogmatic principles can divert from a prudential ethical discourse; prudence being the virtue or source of action that characterises the situation of someone who is conscious of her limitations. It delimits the anti-criterion 'everything is allowed' making us aware of ambivalent situations. It prevents us from taking a simplistic solution by giving up one alternative or the schizoid unification of two opposites.

A prudential ethical discourse has the function of preserving ethical sensitivity (Capurro 1985). This function should be promoted at a local as well as a global level. A global ethical dialogue will unavoidably take cultural ethical differences seriously (Brey 2007). This means not only that moral issues are rooted in specific contexts and traditions, but also that the arguments with which ethics understood as moral philosophy clarify, are 'thick', as Michael Walzer calls them (Walzer 1994). Following this line of thought, global information ethics concern not only the idea of achieving a common ethics (Ess 2008) on the basis of *prima facie* common principles extracted, for instance, from religious traditions (Hans Küng), but also involve a critical intercultural analysis of the differences between moral arguments based on cultural presuppositions. In other words, transcultural and intercultural issues are not to be seen as contradictory, but as part of the necessary tension of human existence with all its ambiguity and openness.

This is the reason why it is important to distinguish between global ethics in the sense of a global *code* of ethics and global *research* on ethics (Vandekerckhove et al. 2008). As any other academic field, ethics in general, and information ethics in particular, are essentially global. They take place primarily in research institutions and professional organisations, such as the International Global Ethics Association (IGEA), and Globethics.net or, in the case of information ethics, the International Society of Ethics and IT (INSEIT), the International Center for Information Ethics (ICIE), but are no less open to local and global societal, political, and legal discussions.

This century will be deeply influenced by information and communication technologies. The ethical challenges arising from them have just started to emerge and develop over the globe with breath-taking speed. Local cultures are changing rapidly due to synergistic effects with other cultures and a global culture is emerging out of such synergies that might help societies and humanity as a whole to be able to better manage global challenges in the ecological, economic and political arenas. Seen in this way, information ethics is an open space of reflection where commonalities and differences, theoretical as well as practical, can be discussed without the immediate pressure of decision-making.

Such a patient discourse, also practised in other scientific and academic fields, might explore the complex historical developments and present cultural layers of different societies and promote a critical appraisal of traditional moral and cultural norms. The present research agenda in information ethics is characterised by the status of the internet and related digital technologies that give rise to questions of privacy, intellectual property, and rights of access to knowledge, identity, information overload, plagiarism, censorship, gender, digital divide and intercultural information ethics (Himma and Tavani 2008).

New technological developments will raise these and other topics from different perspectives. The search for commonalities, no less than the respect for differences, will be a topic of a future information ethics. This topic considers different possibilities of the good life and the choices made by individuals and societies based on their preferences that are based on the traditions in which they are rooted, including their questioning or reaffirming of such traditions as norms of living. The key question in a globalised world is then how far such differences can not only freely co-exist – and nowadays this is not an easy task – but also to enrich and respect each other. Due to the basic fragility of human life and human institutions, including our moral codes and legal frameworks, now more than ever we need spaces for free and creative thinking about these issues that will allow young generations to express their hopes and fears and to imagine a better world. This free space for common ethical thinking, the *ethical space*, is what we, the authors of this paper, would like to envision when we speak about a global code of information ethics. In other words, information ethics is not only about norms, but also about

our critical reflection on the visions and options for better lives in the digital age.

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## Note

1    A draft copy of this Global Code of Ethics is now available online at http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=29439&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL.

## Notes on Contributors

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