

Foundations of Information Ethics

John T. F. Burgess and Emily J. M. Knox, eds. *Foundations of Information Ethics*. Chicago: ALA Neal-Schuman, 2019. 156 pp. \$54.99. Paperback. ISBN: 9780838917220.

It may be of interest to *Theological Librarianship* readers that the editors of this slim volume, John Burgess and Emily Knox, both hold graduate degrees in theological or religious studies, in addition to their PhDs in information studies. The volume, which aims to introduce LIS students to the burgeoning field of “information ethics” and to serve as a reference work for information professionals, features an array of short, topical essays. Robert Hauptman, founder and longtime editor of the *Journal of Information Ethics*, wrote the Foreword.

Burgess defines “information ethics” (a form of “applied ethics”) as “the story of the good that can be accomplished with information, and all the ways it may be used to harm” (1). Expanding upon a presumed understanding of the meta-ethical “concept of goodness,” he explains, “If moral philosophy may be called a systematic exploration of the concept of goodness, then information ethics is that exploration dedicated to the domain of information” (3). Burgess goes on to summarize deontological, consequentialist, character (virtue), and contractual ethics. He maintains that these frameworks are to be considered in “a non-rivalrous way,” and their application may require “overlapping to fulfill a given need” (14). The “non-rivalrous” approach does not fully address recommended pathways when ethical systems provide conflicting counsel.

The second chapter (written by Paul Jaeger, Ursula Gorham, and Natalie Greene Taylor) connects information ethics with human rights. The authors trace the discourse of human rights from Mary Wollstonecraft to the present. Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* addresses the rights to “freedom of opinion and expression” and to “seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” But questions remain in the details. What level of technologically-advanced information access may be considered a “universal” human right? Is it ever ethically acceptable for authorities or institutions to restrict information (by age or topic or other consideration)? As a case study pointedly queries, “Do government policies that mandate the filtering of the content that can be accessed through library computers amount to a violation of human rights?” (22).

Burgess has also written the third chapter, covering the “History of Ethics in the Information Professions.” Borrowing from the work of Martha Smith, he describes five “major themes” in information ethics: access, ownership, privacy, security, and community. The field involves “the creation, storage, retrieval, dissemination, and monetization of information and information systems” (26). The chapter cites the International Federation of Library Associations Code of Ethics, including the summons to be “strictly committed to neutrality” with a goal of creating “balance” (29). The language of relative “balance” could bring its own set of concrete challenges in actual implementation.

Emily Knox tackles “Information Access” in the fourth chapter. Stated positively, information access “provides for rich information cultures that lead to human dignity and autonomy” (37). Full “digital inclusion” embodies not only access (availability and affordability) but also adoption and application (digital literacy and its employment) (31). Knox reiterates John Stuart Mill’s rationale for the freedom of expression: “(1) silenced opinions may be true; (2) silenced opinion may contain some grain of truth even if it is held in error; (3) truth must be contested or it is simply prejudiced opinion; and (4) the meaning of truth must be held with conviction from reason” (39). One could

add the inevitability of constructing strawmen of suppressed opinions. “Information bubbles” and similar echo chambers do not further meaningful and civil public discourse.

Chapter 5, written by Michael Zimmer, examines “Privacy.” The topic relates to control over one’s personal information in the face of collection, processing, dissemination, and even invasion (49). Lapses include breaches of confidentiality, blackmail, unwanted exposure, and unapproved surveillance (49). Zimmer’s discussions highlight data collection methods (such as web tracking cookies) used by major social media platforms and the National Security Agency’s mass surveillance programs (51, 54). The NSA example, according to Zimmer, highlights “the ever-present tension between security and privacy” (54).

The sixth chapter addresses the “Ethics of Discourse.” John Budd’s essay limits the discussion by focusing upon conversational analysis and discourse ethics. He succinctly reviews speech act theory and process semiotics, and he draws special attention to the work of Jürgen Habermas. Although the relevance of such theoretical frameworks may not be immediately evident to all librarians, two case studies apply the essay’s thoughts to real-life library situations (63-64).

Chapter 7 examines copyrights and patents, which “serve a significant social purpose—to promulgate and advance knowledge to enlighten and inform the public” (68). In an essay heavy on history, Katherine Andrews Henderson surveys the legal evolution guiding the current approach to intellectual property. The Copyright Act of 1976 enumerated four well-known considerations of “fair use”: the purpose and character of the use, the nature of the copyrighted work, the amount and substantiality of the use, and the economic impact of the use. The chapter concludes with a summary of the “Defend Trade Secrets Act of 2016” (74).

The eighth chapter looks at “Data Ethics” in the age of “big data” (defined by the 3Vs of volume, variety, and velocity). The chapter surveys fascinating ethical issues, including the divide between those represented in datasets and those who are not (should one’s societal voice be proportionate to one’s digital presence?) and the dangers of algorithmic bias (64-65). Algorithmic transparency and accountability inevitably collide, however, with another value in information ethics, the support of trade secrets as intellectual property (66).

The ninth chapter covers “Cyber Security,” including “cyberwar” and “cyberattacks” (institutional and corporate concerns) with a brief mention of “cyberbullying” (a personal-relational concern) (92). The multi-authored essay discusses the “hacker ethic” and a corollary discussion—if a system cracker hacks without theft, vandalism, or breach of confidentiality, could the action be construed as the harmless result of intellectual curiosity or personal challenge (94)?

Chapter ten attempts “a scholarly analysis of cognitive justice and what it entails within the broader information ethics theoretical framework” (103). Rachel Fischer and Erin Klazar emphasize epistemological diversity in contrast with Western epistemological dominance, including indigenous knowledge beyond the paradigm of scientific knowledge (104-105). The authors acknowledge that the objective of their chapter “is not to enter the debate on whether cognitive justice is representative and supportive of relativism” nor to argue “that all forms of knowledge have valid and instrumental value” (103). Notwithstanding, these questions persistently linger just beneath the surface. May one privilege some forms of knowledge over others (for example, evidence-based scientific knowledge above folklore)?

“Global Digital Citizenship” is the theme of the eleventh chapter, by Margaret Zimmerman. A “global digital citizen” is concerned with values and issues that transcend physical, political, and cultural boundaries (116). Zimmerman argues that “the ability to freely obtain, communicate, and

disseminate information is vital for the attainment of many other human rights” (117). More specifically, the abilities to participate in political activities and to challenge the status quo are “reliant upon the free flow of information” (117). In particular, freedom of the press within a country tends to be a litmus test for the civil and political rights of its citizens (121).

Amelia Gibson’s final chapter on “Emerging Issues” surveys algorithmic bias; the ethics of social media and social movements; precision marketing and social responsibility; technological unemployment; misinformation, disinformation, and fake news; open data, data return, and open data ethics; 3-D printing and regulated items; predictive analytics; bots and AI decision-making; and ownership of health data.

In general, *Foundations of Information Ethics* tends to pass over information concerns of a more personal-relational character, although they, too, are important ethical topics of human flourishing. How will social media posturing, unrealistic marketing and body-imaging, the ubiquity of pornography, virtual-reality relationships, anonymous role-playing, cyberbullying, hand-held device dependence and addiction, and the abbreviated nature of discourse on social media platforms affect personal interactions and the nature of human relationships? Other topics worthy of development include the ethical implications of information organization (how classification and cataloging constructions may have ethical consequences) and the death of expertise in a world of user-created information overload.

Of course, a slim volume cannot cover everything (although selection implicitly reflects valuation). Almost every chapter provides a helpful list of “additional resources” for further reading, and most chapters include thought-provoking case studies. The book ends with fulsome biographies of the contributors followed by a comprehensive index. Overall, this introductory work will serve as an efficient and effective launchpad for further conversations. Although it does not address every relevant topic (nor can it), it will engender meaningful reflection upon important ethical issues within information studies.

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