

## Are codes of ethics relevant?

This issue of the *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society* focuses on professionalism in the development and implementation of ICT. In the opening paper, *Professional Ethics in the Information Age*, Oliver Burmeister discusses several aspects of the maturing ICT profession. Professional bodies appear to have had mixed fortunes in promoting professional ethics. Burmeister is hopeful that the efforts of IFIP and CEPIS, which adopt a greater international perspective, will be more successful. He lays out an argument to support such efforts with the generation of a global code of professional practice. The pragmatic impact of such a code is open to question. Linked to these discussions is Burmeister's final theme of certification and continuous professional development – competent, informed and responsible practitioners are indicative of a mature profession.

There are three responses to Burmeister's paper. In *Yes, But [...] Our response to Professional ethics in the Information Age*, Don Gotterbarn and Keith Miller provide an interesting analysis presented as points of agreement and disagreement. They conclude with an interesting comparison between an intercultural approach, which they favour, and a multicultural approach. In *Aspects of Professional Ethics in the Real World*, Declan Brady provides a practical context. He comments on Burmeister's three themes and explains how CEPIS is addressing the broad area of professional ethics. In *Corporations and Professionalism: Awkward bed-fellows?*, David Kreps focuses on the relationship between organisations and professionals. Kreps expands the professionalism debate by introducing, for example, the notions of corporate and individual responsibility, and liability; all of which have legal foibles.

Viewed as a whole, the papers in this issue raise a fundamental overarching question as to how ethics should be addressed in the development, delivery and support of ICT. Much effort has been expended in the creation and dissemination of excellent codes of ethics by many professional bodies allied to ICT. The adoption and adherence to such codes in practical ICT have to be questioned with the continued occurrence of so many system failures and also illegal activities that occur leading to furores such as the Volkswagen emissions scandal which appears to have involved unprofessional practice by VW's software engineers (Rogerson, 2017). Even though codes of ethics exist, why is it that significant unethical activity within ICT remains?

One reason might be that the current focus of effort and attention is inappropriate. ICT development is a global activity about which IDC periodically produces surveys. The IDC survey of 2014 (Avram, 2014) found that there were, worldwide, 11,005,000 professional software developers and 7,500,000 additional hobbyists of which a large proportion were students. Of the total of 18,505,000, 19.2 per cent or 3,552,960 resided in the USA. The latest published membership statistics taken from the websites of each professional body reveals that ACM has 94,000 members [65,000 professional members and 29,000 student members]; Australian Computer Society has 23,000 members; and BCS, The Chartered Institute for IT has 71,025 members. Even if all ACM members resided in the USA, which is not the case, ACM membership represents a paltry 2.6 per cent of software developers in the USA. Furthermore, the combined membership of ACM, ACS and BCS represents only 1.0 per cent of the global total. This suggests that, on the basis of statistics, professional bodies allied to ICT and their adopted codes of ethics have little influence on practical ICT. Of course, this



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argument does not take into account the nature and importance of the systems developed and who is developing them. Indeed, it would be a fascinating research project to investigate the developer demography in relation to professional bodies.

Nevertheless, from these statistics, it is clear that a large global population needs to engage in a new form of dialogue regarding the ethics of practical ICT. This might include, for example, accessible exemplars of good and bad practice, interactive case analyses of failed systems, and a universal charter for computing which would be the foundation of computing education from the start of a child's education through to becoming an ICT practitioner.

Codes of ethics are important as they provide the detail on which sound ICT strategies can be planned and implemented. However, to suggest these alone can be used to resolve unethical ICT practice is folly. A new approach which engages all members of society is needed. Why? – because, society is now ICT-dependent and anyone can develop ICT systems which might be used by thousands, if not millions, of people. Impacts, whether positive or negative, spread rapidly and are very difficult to reverse.

**Simon Rogerson**

*Centre for Computing & Social Responsibility, De Montfort University,  
Leicester, UK*

## References

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- Rogerson, S. (2017), "Is professional practice at risk following the Volkswagen and Tesla revelations?: software engineering under scrutiny", *ACM SIGCAS Computers and Society*, Vol. 47 No. 3, pp. 25-38.