

Information Ethics

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Abstract

We are now living in a period of history when there is profound increase in knowledge about virtually most things around us. Every passing day demonstrate evidence of the ever growing demand for information and correspondingly, an ever increasing generation of information. The current situation has tremendous implications of certain responsibilities for both users and managers of information. Information management profession and knowledge sharing practice continues to evolve as the volume and complexities of information that must be handled is also changing, thus creating challenging ethical issues to be addressed. This paper will therefore attempt to provide background that will contribute in our understanding of ethical principles and the evolving implications of these principles in the emerging knowledge economy we all have to operate as professionals to get our work done. As a fall out of the information-knowledge sharing framework, we begin to depend on information management tools to facilitate organizing the huge information turnover.

Introduction

We live in a time of profound changes in the way we understand our world and its environment, considering that much information have accumulated over the passing decades. When the word “ethics” is mentioned, it usually conjures a meaning that indicts researchers and the conduct of their research activities. The issue of ethics has always been an issue of great concern for humanity since the time immediately after World War II until now, and has gained tremendous prominence in the field of research particularly, and intellectual property domain. When we consider the increased awareness of issues related to falsifications in research and how researchers have lied to gain evidence, in reporting evidence and findings from their studies, and in attributing their sources of evidence, there is great concern. Others have distorted their findings for political purposes. Scientists are not the only guilty parties—newspaper reporters, law enforcement officers, and intelligence operatives have also engaged in ethically questionable behavior.

As a background, in order to acquaint us with how serious the issue of ethics can be, I will briefly review two marker events that stand out (*among many others*) as symbolic of this development. The Nuremberg War Crimes Trial following World War II brought to public view the ways German scientists had used captive human subjects as subjects in oftentimes gruesome experiments. The early nineteen fifties and sixties, also witnessed the withholding of known effective treatment for syphilis from African-American participants who were infected in the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. Events like these have forced the reexamination of ethical standards and the gradual development of a consensus that potential human subjects needed to be protected from being used as 'guinea pigs' in scientific research. Moral clarity has emerged, in part, because of the moral horrors, great and small occurring in the twentieth century. In presenting this paper, I shall not delineate ethical principles governing research, particularly involving human subjects from management of information emerging from such scientific activities. They overlap each other.

Research and Proliferation of Information and Knowledge

Man occupies the most reputable position in the organization of this planet, at least, as the most intelligent being and by the application of scientific method through observation of his environment, measurement and experimentation, has discovered a considerable number of the natural laws which govern the operations of the universe. This is an achievement attributable to the nature and characteristic of humans as intelligent and inquisitive beings. The accumulated wealth of scientific knowledge has come as a result of systematic investigation of the environment, though initially may have been crude and painfully slow, but no doubt, greater advances in the field of science and technology have been made in recent times than any other period of recorded history.

Empirical studies in science have played important role in unraveling the mysteries of the world and dispelling the fears of the unknown, particularly in the material world. In dispelling these fears of the unknown, there has been a simultaneous proliferation of new knowledge and a better understanding of the mysteries of life and the dynamics of a host of physical phenomena. The scientific methodological approach has influenced almost all facets of human endeavour. The major problem now is how to manage the output of science and some of the unethical fallouts.

The main ethical issues involved in human subject research

Emerging from the historical actions of the German scientists during the period of the war has created unprecedented awareness of the possible abuse of privilege in science, technology and development of intellectual property. There are serious moral issues that must be observed by everybody involved in research and technology. In order to gain the level of insight and proliferation of information we have achieved today into many mechanisms of cellular processes, cure for many diseases among others, which would not have been without science and research, much rigour has been applied in design and implementation of complex researches. However, there are several ethical issues that must be considered when designing research that will utilize participants who are human beings. The primary concern of the investigator should be the safety of the

research participant. This is accomplished by carefully considering the risk/benefit ratio, using all available information to make an appropriate assessment and continually monitoring the research as it proceeds. The scientific investigator must obtain informed consent from each research participant. This should be obtained in writing (although oral consents are sometimes acceptable) after the participant has had the opportunity to carefully consider the risks and benefits and to ask any pertinent questions. Informed consent should be seen as an ongoing process, not a singular event or a mere formality.

The investigator must enumerate how privacy and confidentiality concerns will be approached. Researchers must be sensitive to not only how information is protected from unauthorized observation, but also if and how participants are to be notified of any unforeseen findings from the research that they may or may not want to know. The investigator must consider how adverse events will be handled; who will provide care for a participant injured in a study and who will pay for that care are important considerations. In HIV and AIDS care, which is so sensitive, a lot of ethical principles are applied in information emerging from both clinical studies and clinical care provided (Eromonsele, 2002).

Ethical principles that govern research with human subjects

There are three primary ethical principles that are traditionally cited when discussing ethical concerns in human subject research. The first ethical principle cited by the influential Belmont Report is *autonomy*, which refers to the obligation on the part of the investigator to respect each participant as a person capable of making an informed decision regarding participation in the research study. The investigator must ensure that the participant has received a full disclosure of the nature of the study, the risks, benefits and alternatives, with an extended opportunity to ask questions. The principle of autonomy finds expression in what today is referred to as informed consent document (Etchells, Sharpe, Walsh, Williams and Singer, 1996; Eysenbach and Till, 2001).

The second ethical principle is *beneficence*, which refers to the obligation on the part of the investigator to attempt to maximize benefits for the individual participant

and/or society, while minimizing risk of harm to the individual. An honest and thorough risk/benefit computational analysis must be undertaken.

The third ethical principle invoked in research with human subjects is *justice*, which demands equitable selection of participants, i.e., avoiding participant populations that may be unfairly coerced into participating, such as prisoners and institutionalized children. The principle of justice also requires equality in distribution of benefits and burdens among the population group(s) likely to benefit from the research.

Ethical Issues in Information Dissemination

There are a number of key issues arising from the present information situation. Research output provides information about an innovation emerging from the research. Ethical issues may be considered in such knowledge sharing, intellectual property protection, right to information and the various ways information may be abused. Falsifications are a growing problem because so much confidence is reposed on information emerging from researches being conducted all over, that can be misleading. Information appears to drive everything today, from business to healthcare and from personal to state security. Information resources managers are as accountable as scientists, media practitioners and state security agencies are. The role of ethical considerations in information management has two sides to it; when to withhold and when to inform. With the background of right to be informed, how do we balance the possible trauma of being informed about a deadly disease that has the capacity to destroy? Withholding information has ethical implications that violate human right. Similarly, distorting information and plagiarism are practices that are unacceptable in any society. Almost all research guarantees the participants *confidentiality* -- they are assured that information will not be made available to anyone who is not directly involved in the study. The stricter standard is the principle of *anonymity* which essentially means that the participant will remain anonymous throughout the study -- even to the researchers themselves. Clearly, the anonymity standard is a stronger guarantee of privacy, but it is

sometimes difficult to accomplish, especially in situations where participants have to be measured at multiple time points (e.g., a pre-post study).

Increasingly, researchers have had to deal with the ethical issue of a person's *right to service*. Good research practice often requires the use of a no-treatment control group - a group of participants who do *not* get the treatment or program that is being studied. But when that treatment or program may have beneficial effects, persons assigned to the no-treatment control may feel their rights to equal access to services are being curtailed (Eysenbach and Till, 2001).

In addition, before enrolling participants in an experimental trial, the investigator should be in a state of "equipoise," that is, if a new intervention is being tested against the currently accepted treatment, the investigator should be genuinely uncertain which approach is superior. In other words, a true null hypothesis should exist at the onset regarding the outcome of the trial.

Conclusion

Information has become an important commodity that can be shared, for the good of everyone but can create a serious problem when abused. How should information resources managers balance the ethical implications emerging in contemporary times where everyone has right to be informed.

Recommendations

I would desire to challenge you all in this conference to consider the challenges emerging from your work as information resources managers, where the balance should be in disseminating information to clients, if there are any. Furthermore, to answer these questions; How does plagiarism and violation of intellectual property rights a chronic problem in Nigeria. What role can the profession play in eliminating it?

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