

DIGITAL ETHICS AND OTHER LABELS

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INTRODUCTION

As interest in the ethics of artificial intelligence and other digital transformation technologies intensifies, a number of labels have been added to the existing set to denote the relevant areas of research in law and ethics. This short article is a survey of labels past and present.

MORE RECENT LABELS

Information Ethics

Of the labels still in currency, **information ethics** has been used for at least a few decades.

Its focus is the uses of information, mainly in digital form or contexts, though its concerns apply to physical and analogue information as well.

Central topics include **privacy, confidentiality, disclosure** and **intellectual property**.

The label resonates with phrases such as “**information society**” and “**information revolution**.”

Information ethics has been a well-entrenched label with broad scope. This scope includes the uses of **information** and **associated technologies** through the entire content **lifecycle**. The label also has a parallel in law in such terms as “**information law**” and “**information privacy law**”.

Data Ethics

“**Data ethics**” is a more recent coinage. It is beginning to be used instead of “information ethics” and can be pretty much considered a synonym. It resonates with some more recent phrases such as “**big data**”, “**data analytics**” and “**data driven**”. It does have a slightly different shade of meaning from “information ethics” that reflects these resonances and the technological developments behind them. Reading “big” into “data ethics”, the focus of analysis turns to large data sets and algorithms that operate over them (as the Oxford professors of philosophy Luciano Floridi and Mariarosaria Taddeo observe in their paper “What is data ethics?”(2018)). Human interpretable information objects such as documents and reports are still ethically salient, but the more elemental data that generate information algorithmically take on primacy.

Florida and Mariarosaria propose using the term “data ethics” as an umbrella term that includes the concerns of information ethics but adds concerns about algorithms (including AI) and professional practices. It is doubtful that “data ethics” will be used in precisely this way by the larger community of information / technology professionals, as data has a very well established meaning in relation to information that will likely shape the meaning of “data ethics” as a broadening of focus to include both information and data, as well as data processing.

AI Ethics

“AI ethics” is also a more recent label that reflects a newer area of ethical concern, namely, the impacts of artificial intelligence and AI systems on society and persons. AI ethics issues include **magnified privacy concerns** (e.g., face recognition), **fairness** (non-bias) and **due process** in decision making, **opacity, risk** and **responsibility** for AI based decisions and acts, the **effects of automation on employment**, and **control/manipulation** of persons. (See “Ethics of Artificial Intelligence and Robotics”, published online in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.)

Ethical Computing

Issues in AI can be framed in terms of the distinction between **general AI** and **narrow AI**. General AI (also termed “strong AI”) refers to the research goal of replicating or simulating the full scope of human or human like intelligence as something akin to an “artificial mind.” Narrow AI aims to create systems or agents that perform or simulate specific cognitive tasks within a particular domain (classification, speech recognition, etc.) Ethical issues are shared across this distinction but may present differently (e.g., responsibility). Some issues pertain to general AI and are more speculative (e.g., artificial agents/robot rights, the threat of super-intelligences), while those arising from narrow AI are in the here and now.

Digital Ethics

Another new coinage is **digital ethics**. It too is gaining currency. Its resonance is with phrases such as “**digital transformation**” and “**digital native**”. This resonance suggests a broad scope connected to the emerging **digital technologies** and the **transformation** of business practices and models that undergird digital transformation. Some of these technology categories include cloud and mobile computing, machine learning, robotic process automation, customer engagement platforms, augmented reality, 3D printing, etc. These technologies and their uses implicate the concerns found in all three labels above (information ethics, data ethics, AI ethics), which may make ‘digital ethics’ a serviceable umbrella term. Also, the connection to the idea of transformative business practices based in these technologies positions “digital ethics” as a term to be used in connection with issues arising in business organizations in the areas of human resources, marketing, sales, finance and operations. As these are central issue areas for business ethics, another term suggests itself, “**digital business ethics**”, as an extension of digital ethics into business ethical topic areas.

OLDER LABELS

A number of labels have lost currency, though many of their focal issues are assumed by the newer labels described above. Among them are **computer ethics**, **internet ethics**, **cyber ethics**, and combinations or variants such as **information technology ethics**, **information & communications technology (ICT) ethics**. Similar to the newer labels, these terms reflected the technological and social developments of their time.

For example, “**computer ethics**” has been used over the past decades in a way that focused attention on things done with and to computers. Central issues included **hacking**, **data theft**, **damage to systems and data**, **open source development**, **EULAs**, **software copyrights**, **privacy** and **safety**. Focus was on the machines (hardware and software) in terms of how they were used and what was done to them. (See “Computer and Information Ethics”, published online in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.) Many of the issues arose or were enabled by networking computers. “**ICT ethics**” is to some extent a variant of “computer ethics” that suggests an emphasis on computer networks.

Internet ethics includes/included similar issues such as **digital copyright** problems (Napster), **copyright**, and others. A variation, “**cyber ethics**”, also arose with the early internet and reflected the sense at the time that the internet was a kind of place or space (**cyberspace**). Its issues reflected this sense and included behavior in **multi-player games** and **virtual crimes** and forms of **mistreatment**.

While less frequent, these labels are sometimes used, along with variants and more content specific terms such as “**cybersecurity ethics**” or “**cyberwar ethics**”.