



## Computers and the Internet

# Ethical Concerns

by Anne K. Abate

*Issues and Implications*

*for a profession when its*

*20-year-old Code of*

*Ethics doesn't encompass*

*more recent issues.*

The AALL Special Committee on Ethics has been charged with reviewing the current AALL Code of Ethics in order to recommend a revision or replacement. In this continuing series of articles, the Committee is bringing various issues before the membership for consideration and comment. This article is intended to inspire comments on the various issues involved with the Internet and its impact on our profession. Please read the article, then send your comments to the Committee.

As the Association approaches the review of our existing AALL Code of Ethics, there are many new challenges facing the profession that did not exist when the current Code was adopted in 1978. We are faced with an entirely different view of information and its role in society. We live in the age of the information worker. While this profession may still consider itself the original information worker, many of those around us have adopted the buzzwords ("information society" . . . "information age" . . . "information literacy" . . .) and now consider the location and processing of information as part of their livelihoods.

One of the multitude of causes for this change in thought is the ready access to information that has been made possible by the Internet. The existing Code of Ethics was in place before any of us had access to the Internet. Now many in the profession rely on the Internet to do their jobs and could not function without it.

What sort of implications does this have on the Code of Ethics to be adopted by the Association? Does this change any of the underlying ethical considerations that influence the way we do our jobs? Internet issues involve broader issues of access to information, First Amendment rights, and censorship. Do we need to revisit these issues and address them as part of our Code of Ethics?

On the other hand, are the issues involved in the Internet already covered by other general ethical principles which would be included in any Code of Ethics or Code of Professional Responsibility that would be adopted by the Association? Would we be causing more trouble, or making more people uncomfortable by addressing the ethical issues of computer communications? Would we be violating other ethical principles by which the members of our Association may already be bound, such as duties to the employer?

### Computer Ethics

The general field of business ethics or organizational ethics deals with the way in which individuals conduct themselves in the business environment or in their relationships with colleagues, employers, vendors, patrons, and others with whom they must work. Computer ethics is a much more recent development of the last two decades brought on by the influence of technology on our other relationships. While once only the concern of engineers, philosophers, and computer scientists, computer ethics is now an important issue for everyone given the broad public access to the Internet. Computer systems developed so fast over the last fifty years, it has taken time for the ethical principles underlying computer use to catch up. Perhaps it is time for a profession so closely tied with the use of computers in the production, storage, and retrieval of information to consider the impact of these tasks on its ethical principles.

### Implications of the Internet

We are all familiar with the inherent problems of the Internet. Everyone is a publisher in this new medium and over the years, we have learned to distinguish between valuable sites and those that do not contain any useful information. Do we have a duty to our patrons to instruct them in this finer knowledge of Web surfing? Since we are committed to assisting our patrons as they seek legal information, is access to accurate information an important factor as well? A profession defines its responsibility to society through its Code of Ethics. We need to consider our responsibility carefully as we address the implications of the Internet on our Code of Ethics.

While censorship may not have been a major concern in the provision of legal information twenty years ago, the wild and open field of the Internet makes all of us more concerned regarding the implications of censorship on free and open access to information over the Internet. Is it finally time to address censorship? Will all of our membership be in agreement on open access to all information?

As we all know, the Internet has its own internal code of ethics, which has developed over the years. This unpublished, unspoken code, which includes open, unfettered access to information and the fairly loose rules of netiquette, may be in direct conflict with other codes which attempt to place any restrictive

measures on information access. Thus, any Code of Ethics we adopt must not be in conflict with the unspoken code of the Internet. There may be other codes that may also be in conflict.

## Further Considerations

Beyond these concerns, there are issues addressed in our existing (1978) Code of Ethics which must be considered if we would seek to intertwine them with computer ethics or this newly emerging idea of Internet ethics. Will we still be able to “promote free and effective access to legal information” if this access is only available through expensive, or at least

restricted, methods? How can we carry out this mission in the new electronic environment? Is the confidentiality of the private information of our patrons put into jeopardy by our use of the Internet when assisting them? How can we protect the privacy of our patrons, or is this a concern for us that should be addressed in our Code of Ethics?

If AALL makes the decision to include comments and concerns surrounding Internet communications in its Code of Ethics, it will be one of the first professional associations to take this step and therefore will be serving as one of the models for other associations choosing

to address the ethical implications of the Internet, on the professions and on society in general.

The comments above were intended to provoke thought, criticism, and new ideas. If you have comments or suggestions regarding any of the issues discussed, or if you would like to provide other suggestions to the Special Committee on Ethics, please contact Margie Axtmann (m-axtm@maroon.tc.umn.edu), the Chair of the Special Committee on Ethics, or any of the committee members: Anne Abate, Wes Cochran, Ralph Monaco, or Kay Schlueter.

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