

Mapping the Moral Landscape of Computer Mediated Technologies

Cyberethics: Social and Moral Issues in the Computer Age, edited by Robert M. Baird, Reagan Ramsower, and Stuart Rosenbaum Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books. 2000, pp. 355.

Cyberethics is a ground-breaking anthology whose scope leaves few stones unturned in the new and burgeoning field of computer ethics. Following a helpful opening section that defines the nature of cyberethics, the 26 essays composing the book explore four central areas: anonymity and personal identity in cyberspace; privacy, especially in relation to the capacity of computer technologies to store information about individuals; ownership of intellectual property and copyright law; and the impact of computers on democracy and community. While one will disagree with some of the essays, the book nevertheless structures the field in a coherent, informative, and readable manner.

The opening section, “The Moral Landscape in Cyperspace,” is particularly good, in large measure because of the maturity of the essays included. This section defines the nature of ‘computer ethics’ and clarifies the moral issues related to computers and electronic communication. The section begins with James Moor’s influential ‘classic’, now sixteen years old, that provides one of the most recognized definitions of computer ethics. Moor’s carefully analytical essay in large measure sets the tone of the whole volume.

The most thought-provoking section is the last, “Communities, Citizenship and Democracy.” The essays in this section attempt to delineate the meaning and character of public life in a computer-mediated culture by exploring the impact of computers on our understanding of community and democracy. David Paletz’s short opening essay clarifies how computer mediated communication is making an impact on political processes without underestimating the difficulty of unraveling the impact of technology on political communication. The two concluding essays, by Langdon Winner and Barry Fagin, debate contrary positions on ‘cyberliberatarianism,’ bringing the issues vividly to life. Winner, with particular insight, lays bear the poverty of many notions of ‘community’ that often characterizes computer technology enthusiasts.

The book has two strengths. First, it is timely. Most of the essays appeared in different philosophy and professional journals between 1997 and 1999. Few

readers will be familiar with the whole professional range of the essays or the journals from which they were selected. Second, the authors represent a wide range of academic and professional fields. Consequently, there is a diverse range of professional interest in the issues, and technical jargon and concepts are explained accurately and accessibly. Even those keeping abreast of ethical issues in the field will find something new about computer technologies.

One might have wished that the editors had included a section on justice issues related to computer technology (e.g., the availability of technology, computer technology and employment equity, and the possibilities of a new class system based on computer literacy that is developing in some professional areas.) However, the book's strengths far outweigh its weakness.

Cyberethics balances scope, depth, accuracy and readability well. It is readily accessible to those new to the field or whose background in technology or ethics is limited. It would make a good reader in an introductory computer ethics course. For those more advanced, the book serves the useful purpose of drawing together a group of seminal essays to map a field in a comprehensive and challenge manner. In all, the editors succeed in their purpose to initiate a dialogue about the moral and social dilemmas that are arising from the ubiquitous presence of computer technologies into professional, private, and social living.

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