In Internet Ethics, a group of eight distinguished computer scientists, lawyers, and philosophers discuss ethical issues raised by the Internet in such areas as privacy, intellectual property, information security, democratic values, and professional obligations. The authors contribute separately-written but cross-referenced chapters, most of which, as befits the global reach of the Internet, include comments from experts from diverse countries, among them Australia, Botswana, Brazil, Germany, Hong Kong, Japan, Russia, Singapore, Sweden, and the United States. This rich collection of authoritative, thoughtful, provocative essays and commentaries deserves a broad audience.

Leading off the collection is a concise, accurate history of the development of the Internet, which is written by computer scientist David Beckett. His chapter on “Internet Technology” begins with the Arpanet and summarizes the growth of the network, the introduction of the World Wide Web, and the Web’s recent commercialization. Beckett explains the meanings of familiar and not-so-familiar acronyms such as CGI, IMAP, PICS, POP, SMTP, and XML. According to Beckett, the character of the Internet reflects the culture of its early developers, mostly university researchers, who sought to ensure free access to an open system.

The unprecedented characteristics of the Internet are also identified. In “What is New or Unique about Internet Activities,” John Weckert, a philosopher and information technologist in Australia, stresses its global scale, opportunities for anonymity, and uncontrollability as features that affect old moral questions. He asks whether the Internet facilitates cultural imperialism, and whether paper-based intellectual property mechanisms should be applied to this new medium.

Next, in “Privacy and Security,” U.S. philosopher Herman T. Tavani offers a thorough, scholarly review of philosophical work on privacy. Exploring contemporary concerns about personal privacy on the Internet, he covers such topics as: “dataveillance” (data surveillance by both government and business); data mining (extracting useful information from large databases); cookies (code left by a host site in a visitor’s browser to track the visitor’s interests); and search engines that gather items from e-mail discussions and newsgroup postings.

Tavani describes both classic security mechanisms, such as encryption, and new technologies, such as anonymizers (which permit anonymous Web browsing), P3P (the World Wide Web Consortium’s Platform for Privacy Preferences standard), and trustmarks (icons representing a site’s privacy policies). Noting that current privacy laws are stronger in Western Europe than in the United States, the philosopher endorses a presumption in favor of personal privacy on the Internet.

Legal matters get attention in “Law and the Internet.” Lawyers John Mawhood and Daniel Tysver argue that existing statutory and case law already address many legal issues on the Internet. For example, copyright law balances the rights of authors against the rights of users. Mawhood and Tysver also discuss patents, trademarks, and defamation (slander and libel). They point out that the Internet challenges a
traditional legal concept of jurisdiction, namely, the location to which a law applies. In a dispute between parties in different countries with different regulations, whose rules govern?

The same question can be asked about “The Internet and Varieties of Moral Wrongdoing.” In this chapter, the Dutch philosopher Jeroen van den Hoven starts with general problems posed by the Internet: the inadequacy of geography in determining moral norms, the difficulty of applying concepts such as “reality” and “community,” and the loss of distinctions between agents and objects. Going beyond the standard duty-based and utilitarian approaches to ethics, he grounds the examination of moral aspects of the Internet in four recent philosophical frameworks. One is an approach that emphasizes human flourishing. Another is a pluralist approach that acknowledges possibly conflicting values such as obligations, rights, and utility.

Yet another approach is based on common morality, while a fourth emphasizes moral responsibility. In this densely written essay, van den Hoven raises important questions from intriguing viewpoints; for example, should reading information on the Web be considered a responsible way to form beliefs, and do these beliefs deserve to be called knowledge?

Security problems on the Internet are identified by the U.S. computer scientist Richard A. Spinello in “Information Integrity.” He focuses not only on the integrity of information but also on viruses and unauthorized access. He outlines ways of enhancing security: firewalls, packet filtering, and authentication mechanisms such as smart cards and biometrics. In Spinello’s opinion, Internet service providers and other stewards of information on the Internet have a fiduciary obligation to ensure its accuracy.

Philosopher Deborah G. Johnson examines the popular claim that the Internet serves democracy by providing many-to-many communication and because access to information confers power on individuals. Johnson shows that, to the contrary, the Internet can undermine democratic processes. For example, intermediate nodes could filter information maliciously. She concludes her “Democratic Values and the Internet” by saying that the Internet could either diminish or enhance democratic values.

In “Computer Professionals and YOUR Responsibilities,” computer scientist Donald Gotterbarn first discusses the accumulation of “virtual information” and how that process could harm Net users. For instance, suppose an individual visits a liquor distributor’s Web site. This “electronic fact” is gathered surreptitiously by a software agent without the person’s own knowledge, and might be used to support an invidious inference about the person’s drinking habits that results in a higher car insurance premium.

Because no laws cover this situation, Gotterbarn argues that developers of the Internet have a professional responsibility to protect the privacy of users. He describes the role of a code of ethics, particularly the code of ethics for software engineers that was adopted in 1998 by the Association for Computer Machinery and the IEEE Computer Society and has achieved an international consensus.

The introductory and concluding chapters are by Duncan Langford, a computing fellow at the University of Kent in Canterbury, England, who edited the book. A consolidated bibliography and a comprehensive index round out Internet Ethics. The book is a serious alternative to the popular press, yet accessible to nonspecialists, including students and practicing engineers. They should read this volume to understand ethical issues in the development and use of the Internet.

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**Considering privacy**

LESLEY ELLEN HARRIS

If I had to pick one concept that is receiving more press than I care to read about, that concept would be privacy. Not that I dislike reading about privacy, especially when it comes to my own, but I do like to read novel things about the subject—and not only sensational stories about the invasions suffered by others. What I want is something that explains the real issues, and what they mean to us in the 21st century. By that standard, Simson Garfinkel’s Database Nation does not quite measure up.

To be sure, the book is all about privacy, a concept it sets out in simple terms: “It’s the right of people to control what details about their lives stay inside their own homes and what leaks to the outside.” Garfinkel tells us why the average person needs to be concerned about privacy, and how easily it can be lost today.