

Calendar and Readings (July 6)

Lecture 1

My goal is to explore why computer (or computing) ethics is a distinct sub-field of applied ethics. We'll discuss the work of several modern philosophers. Your reading will be from James Moor, whose rationale for why computing ethics should exist leads naturally to the second part of the course, where we'll be looking at public policy. While this is de facto a required course for computing majors, I strongly believe that it's important for you to come up with reasons as to why it might be useful to study computer ethics as a stand-alone course. I believe that we won't come to any firm agreements on Monday, which is fine. However, this should be something you continue to think about throughout the remainder of the quarter.

Lecture 2

I will offer some background on the evolution of intellectual property law and its application to software, which anticipates the topic of the debate in a couple of weeks.

Reaction paper assignment

I have been thinking a good deal about Moor's observation that the "use of computing creates policy vacuums." It is important to understand what this means, as this is the center-point of why Moor believes there is merit in the field of Computer Ethics. For this week's reaction paper, I would like to write about SOPA (the stop online piracy act), PIPA (the protect IP act – the US senate version of SOPA), and CISPA (the Cyber Intelligence Sharing and Protection Act). If you are unfamiliar with the proposed laws, you can just Google "SOPA" or search for SOPA in Wikipedia. Both of these laws were focusing on protection of intellectual property. There are some interesting international implications had any of these three proposed acts become law. It is likely that Tor, and other means to bypass authoritarian regimes would have been made illegal, and would not have survived and thrived as they have. In addition to defining what these acts were, I would like you to write your thoughts about some of these questions:

1. Address to what extent these proposed laws arose out of a policy vacuum. What is the vacuum these proposed laws were trying to address?
2. Share your thoughts about what "better" laws to address these vacuums might have looked like. Few in Silicon Valley liked SOPA and PIPA as written, with CISPA leading to a more split response.
3. Consider ways the worldwide technology community (individuals, companies, and larger groups) could or should have helped to better inform legislative sub-committees about the issues being addressed. In general what are the obligations of us as software engineers/technology professionals towards addressing these policy vacuums as relate to computing?