ECONOMIC MAN MEETS INFORMATION PERSON

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A Book Review of:

Richard O. Mason, Florence M. Mason, and Mary J. Culnan,
Ethics of Information Management,
Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage Publications, Inc., (1995).

Public Integrity Annual, (1996).

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Few books, intended for students and textbook markets, have something important to teach the academic professional. This is such a book. It is clearly meant to be used as a textbook in graduate, and possibly undergraduate, business ethics courses. It provides, however, a number of insights into the ethical dimensions of public policymaking that are instructive for scholars. The book should be read by students of policy in business and political science, and even moreso by scholars of law and other disciplines. It is valuable to our colleagues in other disciplines in that it explicates very clearly an ethical (and almost social constructionist) perspective of the relationship between information and public policymaking.

Analysis proceeds from the insight that, in every new age, society must develop afresh its own set of moral and ethical values. Modern society is now deeply, and perhaps irreversibly, immersed in what Peter Drucker (1988) first called the "information age." It is estimated, as just one indicator, that over 95% of all jobs will be required, by the year 2000, to devote at least some time to the acquisition, generation, storage, retrieval, or distribution of information. From this and other such indications, the authors argue that our society must develop a new social contract -- a moral posture, in other words, that appropriately addresses the defining characteristics of our environment. The most pronounced of which are information and information technology, which have become our most valuable economic resources. As such, the authors explain, these have direct and important implications for private property.

The principle of private property, as applied to physical property or to the outputs of physical labor, has held up well throughout America's history. The same cannot be said, however, when we apply the same principle to the outputs of intellectual labor. Doing so raises questions of intellectual property rights, privacy rights, information gatekeeeping rights (with respect, for instance, to the Internet) and so forth. Thus, the objective of Ethics of Information Management is both to help fuel and frame the impending debate over our ethical responsibilities to one another with respect to personal privacy, and the use and abuse of information and information technologies. As in past generations, this debate is expected to soon reflect society's need to accommodate a new set of values, characteristic of our times.

The principal needs of agrarian and earlier societies were, for instance, for survival and security. Their values, consequently, reflected the age of "traditional man." The industrial revolution satisfied society's survival and security needs, but introduced another set of needs, based on materialism. These, in turn, reflected the values of "economic man." And, instead of replacing either set, the information age layers in yet another set of needs on top of these. The values that reflect these needs are ideational in nature and require richer reasoning skills than those of economic man. More than helping people "have something," these values reflect the need to help humanity "be someone" psychologically and spiritually. The emerging moral vision lends itself to a new archetype, one the authors call "information person." For them, *"information persons inhabit a world abuzz with flows of information from telephones, radios, televisions, newspapers, personal computers, and computing and communication devices of all sorts."* Information technologies, as well, are increasingly being fused

together into a common, multimedia format which implicates a more unified set of ethical responsibilities. Consequently, information persons will need to successfully negotiate complex information-centered ethical dilemmas.

In Part II, the authors treat ethics as "corrective vision," an idea they use to organize much of the remainder of the book. Ethical thinking requires seeing what is, envisioning what ought to be, and designing a plan to correct reality accordingly. The authors describe the thinking processes necessary for applying the concept of corrective vision and summarize a six-step method for arriving at ethical judgments and evaluations. They are wise to note that, sometimes, the application of different ethical principles to a situation results in different advice. To reconcile this conflict, they introduce the concept of "trumping" or "supersession." Essential to ethical thinking, the principle of supersession holds that an ethical principle can only be ignored or violated if it is supplanted by another principle, one presumed to be of a higher order. The six-step process of corrective vision is then operationalized in several brief, but pointed, case studies that illustrate how individuals may identify and discharge their moral, if not legal, responsibilities while handling various types of information. The application of corrective vision is particularly relevant for contemporary organizations since, as the authors note, most organizations do not currently have information-handling policies in place. In fact, the very nature of most existing organizational structures and incentive systems seems to work against having such policies even though most organizations will need to develop information policies to protect them from future exposures.

The focus of the book broadens in its last few chapters as the authors engage the

quintessential political question: what makes for a "good" information society? To help information policymakers frame intelligent responses to this question (those that reflect the basic values of a democratic society), the authors introduce another policymaking framework. This one, however, is pitched at the societal level. It addresses the practical need to administer our relations among ourselves as members of a society, and to develop a popular and effective system of political governance, given the challenges of the information age. Their framework, called the "societal moral compass map," postulates an innate force, *liberty,* as pulling toward a type of social agreement that permits all societal members to act as freely and as unconstrained as they wish. Directly counter to this force is another, *equality,* which stresses the rights of all societal members to be treated the same. Juxtaposed to this individual axis is a collective axis which deals with the basic forces that serve as the constitutive glue of society.

At one end of the collective axis, the authors posit a strong, primal force for a "natural" form of social control, represented by the *community.* People, they explain, form communities wherein collective concerns and interpersonal relations tend to outweigh individual choices and where there is only passing concern for economy, effectiveness, or efficiency. Counter to the force for community, is another force that also seeks social control, albeit more contrived. The authors refer to this pole simply as *control,* because it pulls toward achieving a few prespecified goals as efficiently as possible, using information as an essential input in the process. Bureaucracies, business organizations, and management information and decision support systems are among the mechanisms used to achieve efficient social control. The four poles -- *liberty, equality, community, and control* -- are then combined to create a framework for

evaluating the trade-offs that inhere to various information-related legislative initiatives and policies.

In summary, this is a valuable contribution to the normative literatures on both public and private administration. It points to the central role of ethical values in the definition and solution of information policy problems, a role that is difficult or impossible to capture in mere economic terms. This is, however, more than a good reference book for policymakers and more than a defense of a discipline. It is a reasoned and insightful analysis of the ethics of managing information and the long and difficult process by which information policy is made.