ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF KM IN PROFESSIONAL SETTINGS

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DIMENSÕES ÉTICAS DE KM EM COLOCAÇÕES PROFISSIONAIS

O papel se trata de implicações éticas de prática profissional de Gestão de Conhecimento e técnicas de Inteligência Competitiva. É a produção de um estudo administrada no literatura francês e internacional e práticas, durante um período de tempo que mede de janeiro 2002 à junho. Éticas são uma pergunta que permanentemente surge desde então " em debates há os homens e aquels pensan ". É iguale atualmente cada vez mais freqüentemente evocado, se está em nível de política (comitês de éticas), práticas industriais (a audit ética e administração) ou debates intelectuais (tribunas na imprensa e simpósios). Quando confrontou com práticas de profissional, princípios éticos viram a deontology, quadros éticos e o gosta. Porém algumas perguntas principais estão em como ganhar aceitação desses and/or de princípios como praticamente os obrigar. Especialmente em enfoque é essas situações onde regras éticas pertinentes diferentes estão em conflito (por exemplo quando éticas privadas se encontram com éticas organizacionais). Qual seguir? A lei de qualquer ajuda é? O papel leva uma visão pragmática dessas perguntas, a partir de experiências de concreto e " induzindo " algumas regras de alto-nível. É discutido que essas meta-regras se tratam de conceitos de moral. Alguns dos temas que são tratados porção com a qualidade de informação, a confiabilidade de informação, o acesso para informação, a confidência de informação contra a difusão de conhecimento, a dimensão de behavioral de cyberculture, o papel ambíguo de internet em ambientes privados, incorporados e internacionais, o estado de autor, criador, ou middleperson de informação, e a pergunta de responsabilidade individual. A conclusão, consistente com a aproximação de constructivist, recordará que ética é um esforço permanente, um trabalho contínuo que tende a virtude e uma " vida boa ", como os gregos antigos dissen.

Palavras-chave: informação, administração, ética, qualidade, inteligência

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The paper deals with ethical implications of professional practice of Knowledge Management and Competitive Intelligence techniques. It is the output of a study conducted on French and international literature and practices, during a period of time spanning from January to June 2002. Ethics is a question that permanently arises in debates since " there are men and that think ". It is currently even more and more frequently evoked, whether it is at policy level (committees of ethics), industrial practices (the ethical audit and management) or intellectual debates (tribunes in the press and symposia). When confronted with professional practices, ethical principles turn to deontology, ethical charts and the likes. However some major questions stand on how to gain acceptance of those principles and/or how to practically enforce them. Especially in focus are those situations where different relevant ethical rules are in conflict (for example when private ethics come across organizational ethics). Which one to follow? Is the law of any help? The paper takes a pragmatic view of those questions, starting from concrete experiences and "inducing" some higher-level rules. It is argued that those meta-rules deal with concepts of moral. Some of the themes which are treated deal with the quality of information, the reliability of information, the access to information, the confidentiality of information versus the diffusion of knowledge, the behavioral dimension of cyberculture, the ambiguous role of internet in private, corporate and international environments, the status of author, creator, or information middleperson, and the question of individual responsibility. The conclusion, consistent with the constructivist approach, will remind that ethics is a permanent effort, a continuous work tending to virtue and a "good life", as the ancient Greeks said.

Keywords: information, management, ethics, quality, intelligence

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INTRODUCTION

Ethics may appear as a fashionable reflection topic. It is returning loudly in all sectors of the social life. Traditionally associated to sciences of the nature (bound to the human existence) or of matter (bound to the human survival), it invests today the field of sciences of the mind, of which makes part Knowledge Management. It is not indifferent. Knowledge Management and social studies in general now take such an importance that one realizes the dangers that they can carry and tries to canalize them on the path of the morals. Among hypotheses that explain this contemporary situation, one can mention the fear of a moral dead end to which leads that society of illusions (virtuality?), disenchantment, hyper relativism, atomization of knowledge and cultures, individualism, transformation of social ties, all based on the omnipotence and omnipresence of technology.

In this paper we shall adopt another view. Ethics is not a phenomenon of fashion, although the intensity of ethical debates seems linked to a fashion pattern. Concern for ethics is as old as mankind. As stated by Comte-Sponville (2001)[1], "ethics is a work, a process, a movement: it is the reflexive path for living, inasmuch as it tends to the good life, as the ancient Greeks said, or the least bad possible, and it is the only wisdom as a matter of fact."

Therefore to treat the ethics of the development of information sciences and knowledge management is a permanent necessity to which this communication would like to contribute. It is partitioned in three; at first we recall the main concepts linked to an ethical reflection and the field of knowledge management; then we address a case study in which our job of KM professionals is confronted with ethical issues; we conclude by proposing a categorization of these issues and sketching out basics of ethical behavior.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Ethics

According to the Webster dictionary, "ethics is the part of philosophy that studies foundations of the morals ; it is the set of moral principles which are the basis of the someone's conduct". For A. Comte-Sponville (ibid., p219), in his *Philosophical Dictionary*, an ethics answers the question : "how to live ? ". "It is always particular to an individual or a group. It is an art of living : it often tends toward happiness and culminates in wisdom". Ethics includes the morals, that answers to the question : " what should I do ? ". Thus "moral commands, ethics recommends".

Morals

Taking the Webster, we will say that "morals is the set of conduct rules considered good in absolute way, or ensuing from a certain conception of life". A. Comte-Sponville (ibid., p389) specifies that "morals is the whole set of our duties that we impose to ourselves, independently of any expected reward or sanction". Morals is unprejudiced.

Deontology

Deontology refers to the good professional conduct. It sets forth principles of moral essence, but targeted on a particular public. The birth of a deontology indicates the state of a profession that reaches maturity and tries to make itself recognized. Starting from a non-written code, one arrives at an explicit and public formulation. The profession needs the experience of the day-to-day practice and of the influences that strive to dominate it, obviously economic influences, but as well as ideological and cultural ones. Physicians have experienced it since antiquity. Journalists since the beginning of the XIX° century. Internauts, information scientists, KM professionals are presently at their deontological stammers for at least two reasons. First, they are multifaceted professions, each one declining his/her/its version of the deontology (journalists, merchants, webmasters, documentalists, multimedia designers, programmers, etc.). Then, for lack of extensively admitted referents, charts and codes they sketch out are bound to evolve.

Codes of ethics and professional charts

In general, these were born among technicians and professionals themselves (for example Bill Gates in the United States, or Telecom engineers in France) worried of the drifts of their tool and of the bad press that have tendency to impede their diffusion. So, they propose various "charts of electronic edition" and the like while academics set forth "user charts".

The problem is that of the acceptance and the acceptability of these charts by the concerned parties, users, producers, transmitters of information. Ensues the question of their enforcement that cannot be assured by a moral pressure only, i.e. a form of individual ethics. It has to be turned into law. However as one is going to see below, law is inevitably phased in time and space. Besides, law is an antinomic response to the search for liberty that dragged the so promising starting of the internet, including newsgroups, freedom of expression, free access to open source software, sharing of knowledge, diffusion of music, etc. But Anglo-Saxons (United States, Canada, Australia,…) are very fond of "home made" codes of ethics

and, for instance, propose classes such as "Creating a Code of Ethics for Your Organization" (C. MacDonald, 2002)[2]. In Latin countries, such an attitude is rarer. A recent survey of the Ifp[3] (2002) indicates that in French regional press, 18% only have an internal deontology Code written by journalists and 59% written by the editors and adopted by professionals.

Law

Law is posterior to ethics. The law applies "hic and nunc"; it is therefore timed and localized. On the contrary, online information is asynchronous and delocalized. In our opinion, the law can only place barriers against already listed behaviors. To legislate too much risks to block the development of our "information society"; not to legislate enough places the moral responsibility on appreciations (notably by the judge, but not solely) to the case by case, therefore on a certain arbitrary mixed with true laxity, as can be seen with recent sentences pronounced in the US for Microsoft case. It is interesting to note that the Anglo Saxons, that are rather adepts of the second way, i.e. laissez-faire, have, in this domain, greatly influenced the French administrative culture. The latter has made proof of a *relative* legislative restraint concerning internet and information management during these last years.

Nétiquettes

Curious phenomenon, the emergence of nétiquettes is a characteristic of the libertarian wind that blew on the generalization of the internet in years 80 in the United States. One doesn't know from where they come ; they spread out themselves by drag and stick. They don't make reference to any outside authority. They call to individual responsibility, thus forming an auspicious ground for the ulterior development of ethical concepts.

Merchant ethics

Whatever was the scientists' dream of a new frontier for intellectual freedom stemming from the technology of internet, it is now obvious that merchants are turning it into a commercial tool. Following the same process of emergence that we have described for engineers, merchants have felt the need for ethical charts. These generally deal with the protection of confidentiality, the respect of copyright and the security of transactions. It is at this price that the internauts could be attracted in the new virtual shopping malls. These prescriptions of merchant ethics are to be taken in account by the specialist of information, because whether he/she likes it or not, he/she has to insert him/herself in the economic process, even though the access or diffusion is free.

But those ethical moves by corporate business should not let us forget that capitalistic processes are also at work. They underlie economic development of the internet and they obey to the natural tendency towards more profits through more or less moral ways. D. Bollier (2002)[4] notes that "the struggle for control of the internet is a modern version of range war". Dealing with the fact that, although the internet infrastructure has been set up on public funding, big corporations are now fighting to privatize it, he comments: "It's almost human nature: if you're allowed the use of something for enough time, you begin to think you have a right on it, even that you own it." So is the internet, and also the airwaves on which data is flowing. He calls this process "a silent theft" and accuses Microsoft and the like to "enclose the Web experience within digital walls that resemble those of a shopping mall" without much concern for public service. This example shows that the same corporation can simultaneously sets forth ethical principles in its consumer communication and behave economically in a clearly non ethical mode.

Co-regulation and responsibility

This brief review of sources of an ethics of the informational activity brings us to adopt two principles to pursue our development. The first one is that of "co-regulation" of the internet. The second one is that of the individual responsibility.

Decreeing rules by the administrative or political authorities proved its limits, as well in practice as in theory, as well for their acceptability as for their applicability. The pure self-regulation is a libertarian dream that cannot achieve itself in global economy dominated by the United States. "A consensus currently clears himself in favor of a form of regulation of the internet by its own actors or « co-regulation », because the other means of regulation must be abandoned. Thus, apart from the fact the internet endures an overflow of applicable legislation rather than a supposed legal vacuum, any state regulation in the domain of the internet would present a certain number of inconveniences from the qualitative viewpoint. The principal risks in elaborating ethical norms by the public powers are the lack of knowledge of the technique, the working and specificities of the internet. […] The co-regulation doesn't mean the absence of regulation or the irresponsibleness of actors of the internet" (Beaussant, 2001, p83)[5].

On the contrary, responsibleness becomes a major stake, as indicates P. Brunet (2001)[6], while concluding that "individual responsibility constitutes the ethical positioning of everybody facing technological change and the founding value of viable societies". We will put it to the heart of our findings.

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AT THE CROSSROAD OF ETHICS

Classically, KM is made of a series of procedures based on information manipulation which include (Quoniam, 1999)[7]:

- Information gathering in different format (internal and external, factual and textual, formal and informal) and from different sources (data bases, web, newsgroups, Cd-Rom, etc.);

- Information structuring both in presentation and contents, manually or automatically;

- Information analysis in order to cope with the needs of the decision maker:

- Information evaluation in order to trace its origin and how it has been made available, especially in the field of competitive intelligence where disinformation is a current practice;

- Information recording with its issue of security and reliability of the data warehouse:

- Information retrieval so that the relevant information is provided out of the huge masses of data;

- Information intelligence which allow to elaborate refined information out of raw data, to understand the environment of decision making, to draw inferences, to trace relationship, to complement information from various sources, to select the right information for the right person, in other words calibrate information to the level of decision;

- Information valuation to really add value i.e. meaning in the professional setting by synthesizing, providing keen expertise of the domain, discovering opportunities and discerning those weak signals which normally escape bulk analysis;

- Information accessibility which deals with determining the right to access the contents of data bases and strategic data.

All these steps of information processing in the KM professional setting imply the notion of qualitative rather than quantitative evaluation and subsequently are liable to ethical consideration, whether at the level of individual morals or with respect to legal constraints. The key issues that we can immediately point out in relation with KM are summarized in the *quality of information,* which is the basis for decision, and its *trustworthiness*. These are at least as crucial as the traditional issues of privacy, intellectual property or security which are commonly invoked. We are going to see how this happen on a specific case study.

A CASE STUDY: HOW TO EXTRACT MEANINGFUL INFORMATION FROM NEWSGROUPS

Newsgroups are forums on the internet which allow any person connected to know the opinion of other internauts about a theme of discussion, and to give anybody or everybody his/her own opinion. They are places of casual and emergent information exchanges by a community of co-actors in a complex communication process. The themes, or centers of interest, are in the scientific domain as well as economic or societal ones that may interest professionals. These newsgroups are typically new outcomes of information technology and provide new ways of communication. Interesting enough is that they indirectly may provide a lot of information about people and the way they think about the theme of discussion, hence be the basis for new knowledge.

Incentives of actors that participate in newsgroups are varied and can cover the gratuitous practices of information exchanges, to interventions aiming at publicizing oneself, or intentions having for objective to launch campaigns of rumors or disinformation. Exploiting the information of a newsgroup may yield either seizing emergent information opportunities that are located at the level of weak signals or avoiding the consequences that could provoke a rumor by deactivating it as early as it appears.

For these two reasons, the analysis of newsgroups and discussion forums is a component of a global approach to offensive and defensive watches. It concerns large corporations as well as small and middle sized enterprises. In professional setting, it especially answers the following issues:

- identification of experts of the domain;
- follow up of the image of an enterprise in a given newsgroup;
- the most upstream possible identification of a rumor;

It is the vigil on the informational risks. For example, corporations in oil or nuclear industries have direct interest to identify or to let identify opinion leaders in discussion groups linked to active environmentalists (boycott, demonstrations, etc.), to know who they are, what they are searching for, how and towards whom should these corporations communicate to deactivate a crisis.

An academic study was conducted at the University of Toulon by the Laboratory LePont on the corpus of a French newsgroup activity (veille-abonnement@egroups.fr) during year 2001.

- 1343 questions have been posed by 630 different actors

- 3124 interventions in total; an intervention is a question or an answer.
- 653 actors have answered questions
- 1025 actors have posed or answered questions

The method for extracting weak signals from newsgroup can be summed up in a sequence of steps out of which we extract four typical.

1. *to collect mail exchanges*. Raw data are of the type illustrated in figure 1. Please note that all following figures are real printouts *with reduced legibility* so as to preserve anonymity of actors, one of the ethical issues of our case study.

FIGURE 2 - Typical raw data from a newsgroup

2. *to analyze contents*. For instance threads of discussion are counted and a statistical curve drawn as in figure 2 (abscissa: cumulative number of threads; ordinate: cumulative number of contributions). It's a Zipfian (Zipf, 1949)[8] curve which permits to focus on the most significant contributions.
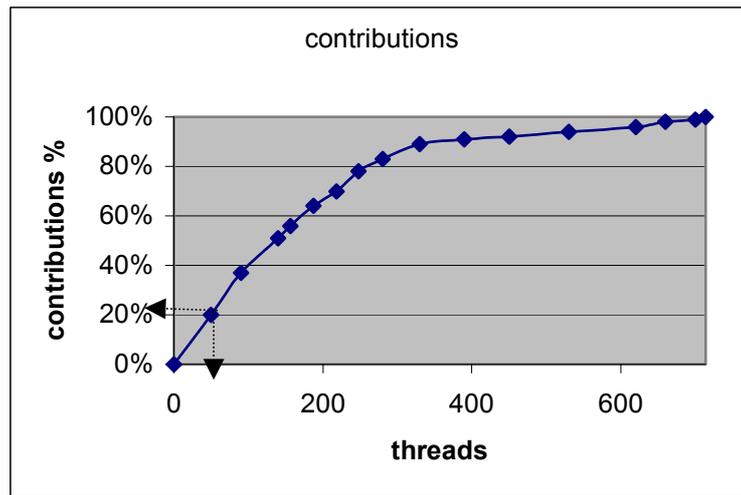
FIGURE 2 – A Zipfian distribution of contributions to a newsgroup

3. *to express relations between contributors*. The graph presented in figure 3 show that three major groups of actors were active during the observation of the group.
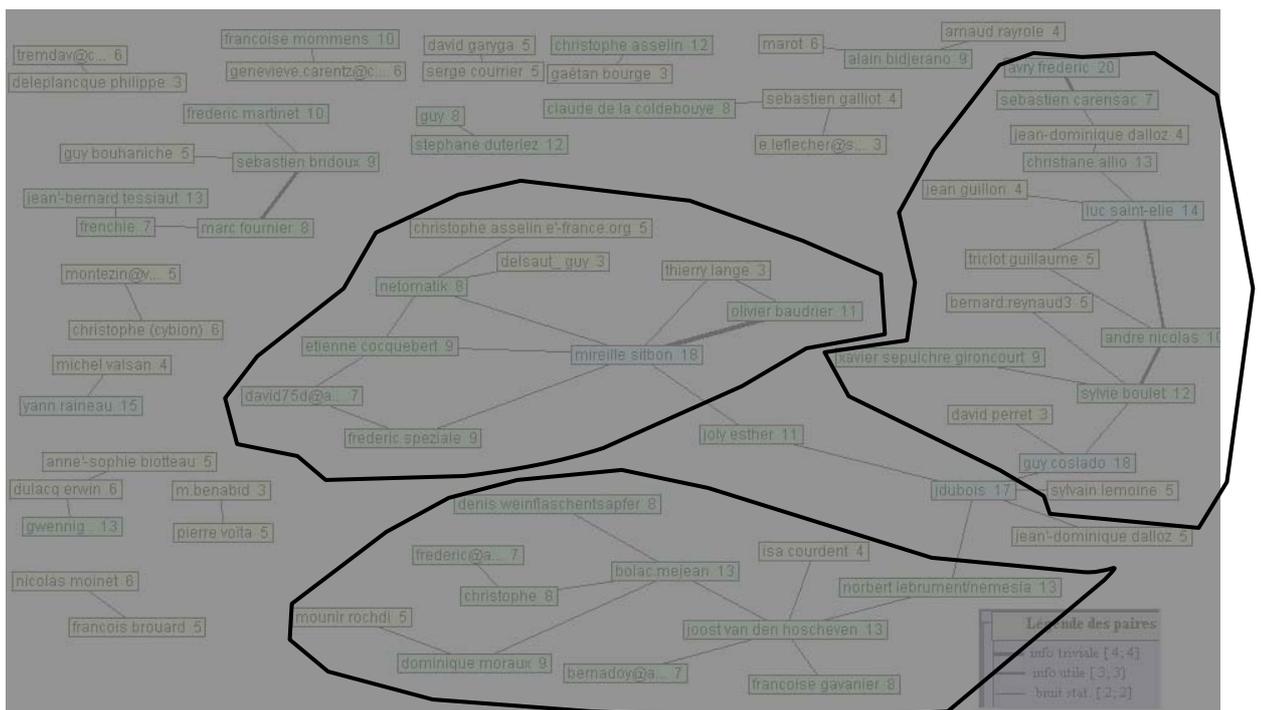

FIGURE 3 – Relational analysis

4. *to extract knowledge and provide judgment*. This academic example doesn't provide operational conclusions. It aims at illustrating the method and the type of results that can be obtained. But here converge all the ethical questions that we are addressing in the next section.

CONCLUSION: HOW TO BEHAVE ETHICALLY AS KM PROFESSIONALS

We have seen in the first section that deontological rules and ethical principles are not lacking in our field, following the professional practices of journalists, documentalists, webmasters and other information professionals. Apparently the answers could be found easily in that professional corpus. However, the experience of our academic study has confronted our research team with actual ethical issues. We are at the core of practical ethical questions because several deontological principles were conflicting while the law is not yet established that would have drawn a clear delineation between what can be done and what shouldn't be done. We have deeply realized the importance of ethical concern when our study was unintentionally made accessible to the members of the newsgroup. Later, those have let known their reactions on the list and in private. We are going to elaborate on this case in order to arrive at some practical guidance.

It's not a surprise that watching newsgroups would raise divergent opinions. First, any kind of watching is more or less associated with intelligence in its military or criminal acceptation, even with eavesdropping. Hence not recommendable. Second, watching e-mails is controversial since mailing to the group may be taken as private mail as well as publication on a media. Hence the law is not helping at present. Third the use and interpretation of data are far from being methodologically established (for instance: what is the representativity of the sample?). Hence how to draw conclusions from such a study.

Following our accidental divulgation of raw data on the web, we have received a bunch of mails which we can classify in five categories summarized in the following assertions from the most negative to the most positive:

- threat of judiciary follow up for violation of the French law "Informatique et liberté";
- emotional reactions based on the fact that invisible colleges (i.e. the groupings shown in figure 3) were revealed;
- inefficiency of workgroup analysis due to the garbage contents of most messages;
- effectiveness of workgroup analysis to disclose weak signals and protect major interests (public or private)
- deep comprehension of our approach as a by-product of our society of information in the direction of competitive intelligence;

- satisfaction to see in the open the kind of results that many corporations (especially the big ones) are routinely obtaining in the shadow.

The prominent finding is that a single issue in knowledge management produces a large variety of responses, based on ethical or legal values, from rejection to enthusiastic acceptance. Interestingly enough is to browse the background of the authors of those comments. Although not quantitatively established, it is clear that positive comments are coming from professionals that adopt an explicit ethics of usage of data and transparency, more or less linked to Scip (the [Society of Competitive Intelligence Professionals](#)). Negative comments come from general public, fascinated enough by techniques and methods of competitive intelligence to take part in a newsgroup, but insecure enough to admit all the consequences of their participation.

As a conclusion, we would like to sketch out some guidelines for an ethical conduct in Knowledge management. We have seen that questions of morals are neither permanent nor universal; they are deeply embodied in the individual and his/her professional setting. Practical issues are raised when they are in the middle of conflicting deontological rules. Most people agree on ethical values such as freedom, respect of the individual, ban on violence, etc. Problems arise when those values are conflicting, e.g. for a professional, when free access to information may damage his/her institution.

Hence we return to our general reflection on Ethics in section 1: ethics is a continuous process; it is permanently both threatened and reinforced; it is a personal and social construct; it is not redeemable to simple rules and guidelines, contrary to what most managers and politicians would expect. We can set forth a theoretical viewpoint for ethics in our professional setting: since knowledge management is grounded in information processing, as shown in section 2, an invariant of our ethics is certainly the quality of information, and the confidence that can be attached to any piece of information. This specifically implies transparency and tracing the processes of information elaboration in a way similar to Iso quality certification which has induced consumers to accept and be confident in industrial products. If a higher level of professional ethics should be defined, meta-ethics should deal with happiness following Kant's heritage. In our technique geared society, the guarantor of ethical process is to transcend the technique and aim at human values.

Final word: be cautious with your communication on the internet; you might always be watched!

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