Chapter VII
Accountability and Ethics in Knowledge Management

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to argue the case that the study of Knowledge Management should embrace considerations of ethics and accountability. Knowledge Management—a relatively new discipline—is often seen as a necessary but benign component of any modern business organization. This chapter suggests that underlying modern notions of knowledge management are the far older practices comprising the management of knowledge prevalent in most spheres of human activity. Many of these are political in nature, and distort and manipulate knowledge to achieve ends which may include criminal activity and fraud, but often merely serve to further the aims of organizational actors. The discipline called Knowledge Management has much to learn from the ancient art of the management of knowledge.

In science, knowledge is an unmixed good; in ethics and politics it is bad as well as good  

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this discussion paper is to make the case for integrating ethics and accountability into research about Knowledge Management (KM). Ethics refers to the motives and methods
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for KM processes, and their impact on individuals, on organizations, and on society. Ethical issues are also relevant to the researcher studying KM, where the subject being researched and the way the research is conducted can raise ethical issues. The interaction of actors, processes, and technology in all aspects of KM from research to design, and actual use can raise a wide range of ethical dilemmas.

KM has been described by a range of commentators as comprising of practices used by organisations to identify, create, represent, store, distribute and share information. It has been an established discipline since 1995 with a body of university courses and both professional and academic journals dedicated to it. Knowledge Management programs are typically tied to organisational objectives such as improving performance, competitive advantage, innovation, transfer of lessons learned, and the general development of collaborative practices.

Motivation and behaviour related to KM initiatives are necessarily embedded in power relations. Such power relations play a role in the design, implementation, use and research into KM systems, and assumptions, motivation and dilemmas, sometimes explicit, but more often tacit, may affect behaviour. At the same time, the widespread public discussion around the relationship between business organizations and ‘social responsibility’ is a relatively recent phenomenon though it has now developed an extensive literature, for example (Gray & Owen, 1996). The discussion has been a useful one for reminding business organizations, and government at times, of their position, relationship, and responsibility to a social world beyond their corporate boundaries. In doing so discussions about accountability have highlighted the ethical responsibilities associated with KM systems, processes and research. In our chapter we draw attention to the distinction between the subject matter of Knowledge Management and the much older topic, not specifically articulated within the IS discipline, of the Management of Knowledge. The latter is much more concerned with the manipulation (and often distortion) of knowledge to obtain desired outcomes (Land et al, 2004).

The chapter draws on examples where the design, implementation, and use of KM systems and processes have, sometimes deliberately, overlooked questions of accountability—what we have called the dark side of knowledge management (Land et al 2005a,b). Examples are provided from both the business and public sector. The first part of the chapter establishes why an ethics dimension is necessary in KM theory and practice; and the second part identifies questions on how an ethics dimension could be integrated with current KM research and practice.

WHY KM RESEARCH AND PRACTICE NEEDS AN ACCOUNTABILITY DIMENSION, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND ETHICS

Ethics relates to codes of conduct regarded by a community as ‘right’ and ‘good’. They may be based on notions of morality or values. They may be faith based, determined by rules of proper conduct laid down by some higher authority. As such, we note the conflicts that can arise where values clash or rules differ. Ethical principles are rarely the subject of absolute standards. Nevertheless, conforming to ethical standards does require some consensus at least within defined communities such as those represented by professional associations. Some communities consider ethics sufficiently important to subject their activities to scrutiny by an ethics committee, which may operate on a mandatory basis with legal sanctions against those who flout its rulings. Others work on the basis of voluntary agreement. The medical profession has led the way in being subjected to mandatory ethical audits as well as voluntary agreements.
In this context it is of interest to note that codes of conduct, which might be defined as ethical, can also apply to communities of practice outside the normal establishment. The notion of ‘honour’, which helps to sustain an organization such as the Mafia, with its strict adherence to Omerta (silence), is an example of the manifestation of a darker code of ethical conduct. Such extreme examples illustrate that ethical principles are rarely absolute; instead they are both relative and contextually bound, arising as they do out of particular situations and circumstances.

In the following section we distinguish between various situations in which issues of ethics and accountability surface in relation to KM and the Management of Knowledge. However, we do not claim to provide a complete or comprehensive classification. Instead, the situations noted are put forward as an indication of the range of issues which the IS and KM communities need to address.

For the purposes of discussion we have chosen to highlight the ethical issues according to four dimensions. The first dimension relates to issues around intentionality in Knowledge Management practices, the second relates to the design and implementation of knowledge based systems, the third dimension relates to issues related to intellectual property rights and the final dimension relates to knowledge production activities using research as an illustrative example.

**Intentionality in Knowledge Management Practices**

It has been suggested that beyond the rhetoric advocating the value and efficacy of KM practices and systems there is a hidden agenda (Bryant 2005). Bryant suggests that the drive to introduce such systems includes an underlying but rarely explicit motivation – to increase the power of the organization over the knowledge worker. By capturing what the knowledge worker knows in knowledge stores such as data warehouses, the knowledge worker becomes less valuable and can even be dispensed with. Indeed is the hidden agenda, behind the importance attached to making tacit knowledge explicit in the KM literature (for example, Nonaka, 1998), related to the attempt to extract maximum value from the knowledge worker, in such a way that he/she becomes more vulnerable to downsizing? Bryant suggests that KM practices like BPR, for example, are merely a euphemism for downsizing. It is easy to dismiss this as mere conspiracy theory, but the prevalence of spin, propaganda and PR in the modern world of business as well as politics, suggests it needs to be taken seriously.

Indeed, organizational and political studies emphasize the instrumental use of knowledge. For example, Sussman and her colleagues (Sussman et al, 2002) define the organization as a “political system, a network of interdependent members using power, influence, and political manoeuvring to achieve their goals.” Politics can be defined as an intentional social influence process in which behaviour is strategically designed to maximize short term or long term interests and the management and manipulation of knowledge and information provide one of the principal means to achieve this. This raises a range of ethical issues related to the behaviour of private corporations and public administrations.

**The Design and Implementation of KM Systems**

What are the ethical responsibilities of those who design and implement KM systems which themselves might create situations which may be regarded as unethical? Do we need an ethics committee, as is widespread in adjudicating the appropriateness of medical practice, to evaluate proposals involving design and implementation of innovative systems in the IS arena? As Hosein (2005) points out in his case study of data mining for DARPA—the Total Information Awareness Program\(^2\), subsequently renamed the Terrorist
Information Awareness Program—the ethical issues regarding data mining were not raised by the IS or KM communities, indeed quite the opposite. Some of the designers, members of the IS community, took pride in the power of the systems. Instead, criticism has come from sources outside the ICT community—in this case from students of policy making. It is they, who in pointing out the ethical problems, have managed to get the systems, described in the example below, suspended.

The object was to design and implement a data mining system which could be used to gather and correlate data about the activities of citizens, engaged, for example in activities themselves lawful, such as attending peaceful protest marches. The data mining techniques were designed to collate data from a number of sources to create profiles of groups of citizens, identifying them a potentially constituting a threat even though the majority of those participating were wholly innocent of creating such a threat. Further, the information was to be made available for selling on to third parties without the knowledge of the citizens concerned and where its use could offend against notions—or even legislation—regarding human rights.

Intellectual Property Rights

The Management of Knowledge and Intellectual Property Rights are firmly linked. What type of knowledge can be shared, and who has ownership of knowledge as a valued asset, is frequently determined by the laws and norms related to Intellectual Property Rights (Baskerville and Dulopovici, 2006b). As such, questions around ethical behaviour face both the employer and employees. Employers may unfairly exploit the knowledge of employees without providing them with due rewards for pooling the knowledge they have contributed. Conversely, an employee may face ethical dilemmas by withholding or distorting knowledge attributable to the employer or the team, for personal gain. But the issues are broader than those of individuals and often relate to the balance between the rights of the corporation to limit access to knowledge as against the rights of society to share in that knowledge for the benefit of society as a whole.

One example highlighting the relativistic notions underlying ethical issues is the debate stemming from the unravelling of the Human Genome (Ferry and Sulston, 2003). A team, directed by Francis Collins, and working under the auspices of the US Government (the Department of Energy and the National Institute of Health), held that the intellectual property rights for the human gene sequence belonged to the organization sponsoring the research, and as such their methods and results could and should be patented. Indeed the mission statement from the US Government suggested:

*An important feature of the project was the federal government’s long-standing dedication to the transfer of technology to the private sector.* By licensing technologies to private companies and awarding grants for innovative research, the project catalyzed the multibillion-dollar U.S. biotechnology industry and fostered the development of new medical applications.

Another team working in Cambridge, led by John Sulston (Ferry and Sulston, 2003), held that the human genome belonged to all humanity and the outcomes of its elucidation should be available to all and should not be exploited solely by sectional interests. The project, ...worked so well because the community held an ethos of sharing from the beginning. We gave all our results to others as soon as we had them. From sharing, discovery is accelerated in the community. Research is hastened when people share results freely.

Despite their differences in the research ethos, the two teams collaborated and in the end agreed
to make their joint findings available to all. The example demonstrates that well meaning people can operate with different value systems each of which raise ethical issues. At the same time it highlights the dilemma facing the various actors when value systems conflict with examples of principal actors changing sides.

However, as Kyle Jensen and Fiona Murray of MIT recently reported, 20% of the known human genome has, in the USA, been patented mainly by private biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies (Guardian, 14th October, 2005, page 11). Empirical research, (Murray and Stern, 2005) indicated that the use of patents in biomedical research had an impact on reducing the amount of communication between complementary research projects. Nevertheless the debate between those who regard the maintenance of intellectual property rights as a condition for research and discovery, and those who favour an open stance as encouraging discovery as well as following ethical principles, rages on.

Conversely, the Open Source movement, in which individuals contribute their skills and knowledge to a co-operative project, has turned older notions of intellectual property right on their head. The Open Source movement raises a number of ethical issues including the problem of distribution of rewards when partners of the venture contribute to knowledge.

For example, the construction of a new encyclopaedia represents a KM activity. One such project, the creation of the Internet located Wikipedia, based on open source principles, invites individuals to contribute their knowledge to the evolution of Wikipedia. Contributors receive no reward. Wikipedia is available free to anyone who has access to the internet. Wikipedia follows none of the normal rules of KM and the question of intellectual property rights is ignored. Articles are not reviewed. But all users are entitled to make corrections. However, the venture raises its own ethical issues. The development of Wikipedia provides an opportunity for special interest groups to add their own special slant to entries and for other special interest groups in opposition to these to attempt to ban Wikipedia. Thus one group has appealed to GOOGLE to remove Wikipedia from its listings.

Nevertheless, the two examples, the Human Genome project and Wikipedia, represent what is perhaps a new ethical stance for the KM community. Knowledge sharing—a key aspect of KM—is also related to the principles enshrined in the notion of intellectual property rights which set a limit, defined in legal terms, with whom knowledge may be shared and under what conditions.

Research as a Knowledge Production Activity

Ethical issues exist in all steps of the research process. Research can be defined as a knowledge production activity involving the researcher making decisions about design, collection, storage, distribution, and sharing of knowledge. Included in the list are the protection of new knowledge from access by unauthorised persons or organizations and the notion of intellectual property rights.

Aside from the ethical issues typically associated with research (e.g. anonymity, confidentiality, non-attribution), the special case of action research brings additional ethical dilemmas to the forefront. In research such as action research, which involves the researcher intervening in the activities of the organization being studied, what are the obligations of the researcher to make clear the possible consequences of the intervention on individuals and the organization? Should, for example, the researcher take the role of whistle blower in cases where the researcher comes across dubious or illegal practices? Or should the research take a more distanced approach and just describe the situation?

In IS research the action research example, and the ethics it raises, becomes relevant when thinking about the discipline in its more applied form, and in particular in case of collaboration...
between academia and industry. According to Hosein (2005), IS researchers, in particular those whose research is closely tied to the design and implementation of systems, have been slow in flagging ethical issues. Certain issues remain taboo subjects – in part because research funding and collaboration depends on the good will of sponsors whose sponsorship maybe conditional on arriving at findings not inimical to the interests of the sponsor. The condition is rarely made explicit but is nevertheless recognised by the researcher or by the researcher’s employer. In other words, it appears that the IS researcher being preoccupied with the ‘management’ perspective and the ‘managing’ of information and knowledge for the benefit of the organization, and with the impact of the research on their own careers, researchers may ‘forget’ to worry about any of the broader issues.

Knowledge management as an inter-disciplinary field of research also provides examples that help to illustrate ethical issues and dilemmas, citation being the case in point. Citing references is itself an act of knowledge management and needs to be carried out in an ethical manner – that is it is the duty of the researcher to cite adverse as well as supportive references. But providing a comprehensive reference list can be burdensome and in particular where multidisciplinary research is involved. Perhaps, the role of the referee in peer reviewed research needs to include the explicit obligation to ensure ethical frontiers are not transgressed and the Journals evaluation form needs to include an ethical rating.

**ORGANISATIONAL PROCESSES AND ACCOUNTABLE KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT**

KM systems provide an opportunity to manipulate and control knowledge in all phases from the discovery and collection of knowledge, to its storage and distribution (Alter 2006). Knowledge can be created, omitted or withheld, amplified or exaggerated, diminished or distorted. Thompson refers to knowledge derived from such activities as counter knowledge (Thompson, 2008). Such activities may arise by accident or mischance (perhaps a virus attack), but often the manipulation is instrumental. Two examples illustrate such manipulations of knowledge in two different contexts: private sector and civil society.

Enron, for example, had a reputation amongst its employees of sharing knowledge for the benefit both of the organization and its employees (Cruver 2003). At the same time the senior management of the company was engaged in a massive fraud engineered with the help of the management of knowledge on a vast scale. In its final stages this involved the destruction of information, and hence knowledge, about the affairs of Enron, by means of shredders abetted by the company’s auditors. Enron is a high profile example but there are many similar examples where knowledge is manipulated to achieve what turn out to be fraudulent and criminal outcomes. In the real world practices involving knowledge manipulation are widespread even if they do not break the boundaries of criminal laws on the scale of Enron.

With regard to accountability in civil society organizations, Ebrahim (2003) argues that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) must consider how information flows from the local level NGO, up to the level of the international funding agencies. The manipulation of knowledge when it travels from a poorly resourced NGO in India, for example, is motivated by the need for survival. The way budgets are validated is itself a political process used for determining priorities. Ebrahim notes the need for accountability from international level agencies, down to the local level NGOs as a way of ensuring proper, ethical, conduct.
To provide answers to the many issues raised there is a need to draw on a very wide range of sources coming from many disciplines. Baskerville and Dulipovici (2006a) suggest that a number of disciplines contributed to our current notions of KM. Table 1 reproduced from their paper summarises these sources.

But there are other sources and ideas which current thinking about KM has tended to neglect, but which throw a somewhat different light on some of the issues and in particular the ethical issues. Examples drawn from outside the realm of IS or KM, include the notion that the management of knowledge relies on communicative actions. McLuhan (1964) warned us that modern methods of communications are used to distort the truth, while Habermas’ (1987) Theory of Communicative Action provides us with valuable insights relevant to the issues raised in this paper, in particular how the way we use language in part determines responses and behaviour.

**Table 1. Disciplines contributing to current notions of KM**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Foundation</th>
<th>Key Knowledge Management Concepts Drawn from This Foundation</th>
<th>Applied Purpose in Knowledge Management</th>
<th>Developed Knowledge Management Concepts</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information Economics</td>
<td>Intellectual Capital</td>
<td>Rationale</td>
<td>Knowledge Economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Information Systems</td>
<td>Core Competencies</td>
<td>Rationale</td>
<td>Dumbsizing, Knowledge Alliances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Culture</td>
<td>Tacit and Articulated Knowledge</td>
<td>Process Definition</td>
<td>Knowledge Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Structure</td>
<td>Goal-seeking Organizations</td>
<td>Process Definition</td>
<td>Knowledge Organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Behaviour</td>
<td>Creativity, Innovation, Organizational Learning, Organizational Memory</td>
<td>Process Definition</td>
<td>Knowledge Creation, Knowledge codification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artificial Intelligence</td>
<td>Knowledge-base Systems</td>
<td>Process Definition</td>
<td>Knowledge Infrastructure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Management</td>
<td>Risk value, Benchmarking</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Qualitative Frameworks</td>
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The *Management* of Knowledge provides a rich context in which to expand and re-evaluate our ideas around KM systems and processes, beginning with organizational politics. There has been a certain amount of discussion in the KM literature of the part played by politics in organizational behaviour, drawing on the literature of organizational politics and pointing to the political and ethical issues related to KM (Pettigrew 1973; Mintzberg 1983; Wilson 1995; Pfeffer 1997; Sussman et al 2002). Nevertheless, the discussion of these issues has not been more than marginal.

The link that seems to us to be missing, is the one between ‘knowledge management’ and the ‘management of knowledge’. Newer forms of KM are part of the older, what may be termed, *Management* of Knowledge and must be reviewed and evaluated in that context. By examining KM in the context of the broader *Management* of Knowledge, as viewed (but not so named) by a range of authors (Schulze 1999; Grover and
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Davenport 2001; Earl 2001; Wilson 2002, Lowell and Claudia, 2005, Land et al, 2005a), the ethical issues become clearer. Knowledge Management as discussed in the IS literature is young—approximately 15-20 years old. The Management of Knowledge however is older and encompasses a wide range of practices which are widely known and have been discussed over the centuries by philosophers, theologians, educationalists, criminologists, among many others (see also, Land et al, 2004; Land, et al, 2005a; Land, et al, 2005b).

Much of the published writing on KM systems and practices is guided by expectation that such systems and practices are naturally benign and necessarily designed, implemented and used with the improvement of the condition of mankind in mind. However, this is only half the story and we find that many other KM type practices, perhaps the most discussed in existing literature and perhaps more often related to the Management of Knowledge rather than KM per se, have more malign objectives or are, at the least, self-serving and do not result in the desired or planned improvements.

Examples include the use of propaganda and spin in politics (see Colonel Kenneth Allard, Strategy Expert, reported in the Guardian Newspaper, 8th January, 2004, for a good example); the imposition of censorship in relation to religious dogma, the construction of national curricula in education which have xenophobic or racial overtones; the use of the ‘need to know’ principle in industrial management practices such as Taylorism whereby the individual worker on an assembly line is only provided with that minimum knowledge enabling a fragmented task to be carried out; the use of less than truthful advertising and PR in marketing; and the manipulation of knowledge for criminal activities including corporate fraud. The list of examples is long. Ethical issues relating to this older form of the management of knowledge have been articulated and much discussed. The new discipline of KM, too, has to concern itself with the ethical issues which human behaviour inevitably gives rise to.

**CONCLUSION**

The chapter identified issues and questions that establish an agenda for further debate and research that may contribute to a wider understanding and hence improvement in ethical conduct and its concomitant requirement for accountability. The sort of ethical questions that we can begin to ask around knowledge management systems and processes include:

1. What ethical issues such as discrimination, and domination, arise from the interaction of sponsors, designers, implementers and users?
2. How is accountability built into all aspects of KM from research to practice? And can we devise systems of accountability in ways which do not stifle initiative, entrepreneurship and innovation?
3. Who promulgates ethical standards and acts as their enforcer?
4. How are disputes involving contested value systems and ethical standards resolved?
5. All new systems have unintended consequences. Some of these may themselves raise ethical questions. How do we respond to these?
6. How do we ensure transparency and uncover the hidden agendas?

The above questions are relevant to both researchers and practitioners of KM systems.

**REFERENCES**


ENDNOTES

1 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Information_Awareness_Office
2 http://epic.org/privacy/profiling/tia/
3 (see: http://www.ornl.gov/sci/techresources/Human_Genome/home.shtml)
4 (see: http://www.sanger.ac.uk/Info/Press/2002/021007.shtml)