

# Building an ethical information society in Africa

Anneline du Preez

In May 2012, the African Centre of Excellence for Information Ethics (ACEIE) was established at the University of Pretoria. This collaborative initiative between the South African Department of Communications, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and various universities across Africa is housed by the Department of Information Science in the School of Information Technology and is led by Mr Coetzee Bester.

Information ethics is a descriptive and emancipatory discipline that studies changes in the relationship between people and the world due to information and communication technologies. In Africa, the field provides a unique platform for building an information and knowledge society driven by critical reflection on ethos and values within the African context. It addresses opportunities and challenges unique to the development of African societies.

The establishment of this Centre was necessitated by various converging factors. The rollout of broadband in South Africa and Africa made information more readily available. The recent construction of various submarine cables, including SEACOM, directly contributed to the expansion of broadband capacity on the continent. The growth in communication and information management capacity contributed significantly to the development and management of e-skills, e-governance and information ethics, and the challenges related to these. It was found that students were not properly introduced to information ethics and did not fully understand the concept and purpose as well as the practice of this discipline.

One of the main objectives of ACEIE is to develop a curriculum for teaching information ethics in Africa.

During the first three years of its existence, the Centre will develop a curriculum structure and implement the content at universities in Africa. A group of more than 30 international academics are working together on this pilot project.

According to a memorandum of agreement between the University of Pretoria and the national Department of Communications (who made available R7.4 million over three years), the Centre will also perform the following functions:

- Support the establishment of other ethics centres in Africa through the African Ethics Research Centre Network.
- Convene, coordinate and administer an ethics conference and follow up on the implementation of conference resolutions.
- Facilitate the hosting of Ethics Awards Ceremonies in collaboration with other partners.
- Focus on research and training in information ethics.

Other functions of the Centre include the following:

- Develop short courses for governmental officials in the nine provinces of South Africa.
- Encourage Information Ethics workshops where academics and practitioners can convene

---

The national Department of Communications awarded R7.4 million to the Centre to support, inter alia, the establishment of other ethics centres in Africa, to organise conferences, and to support research and training in information ethics.

---



→ The African Centre of Excellence for Information Ethics, housed in the Department of Information Science, was established at the University of Pretoria in collaboration with the Department of Communications, UNESCO and various universities across Africa.

in order to exchange knowledge and enhance the practical dynamics of Information Ethics.

- Function as a centre where researchers can come together to endorse key proposals concerning information ethics and its application in African societies, governments and institutions.
- Maintain its collaborative relationships with UNESCO; the E-skills Hub in the Department of Informatics; and the Department of Information Science.

Throughout 2012, various academics were approached to do research on the impact or importance of information ethics in their field of expertise. These academics will have the opportunity to publish their articles in the 2013 *Innovation Journal*, of which a special edition is focused on information ethics. ➔

## Establishing a centre of excellence for information ethics

**In 2007, a group of international academics in the fields of information technology, philosophy and politics formed an academic network to conduct research on information ethics.**

This network is now known as the African Network on Information Ethics (ANIE). It identified a gap in the academic representation of the African continent on the global stage, specifically pertaining to information ethics. It therefore organised events to stimulate research on information ethics in Africa.

The result of these activities and international collaboration led to a partnership with the national Department of Communication, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Culture Organisation (UNESCO) and various universities across Africa.

The collaboration eventually contributed to the establishment of the African Centre of Excellence for Information Ethics (ACEIE) in the Department of Information Science at the University of Pretoria in 2012.

Its purpose is to formally reflect on the activities and history of information ethics in Africa. This reflection should contribute to research on the topic and allow networking with other academics in the field.