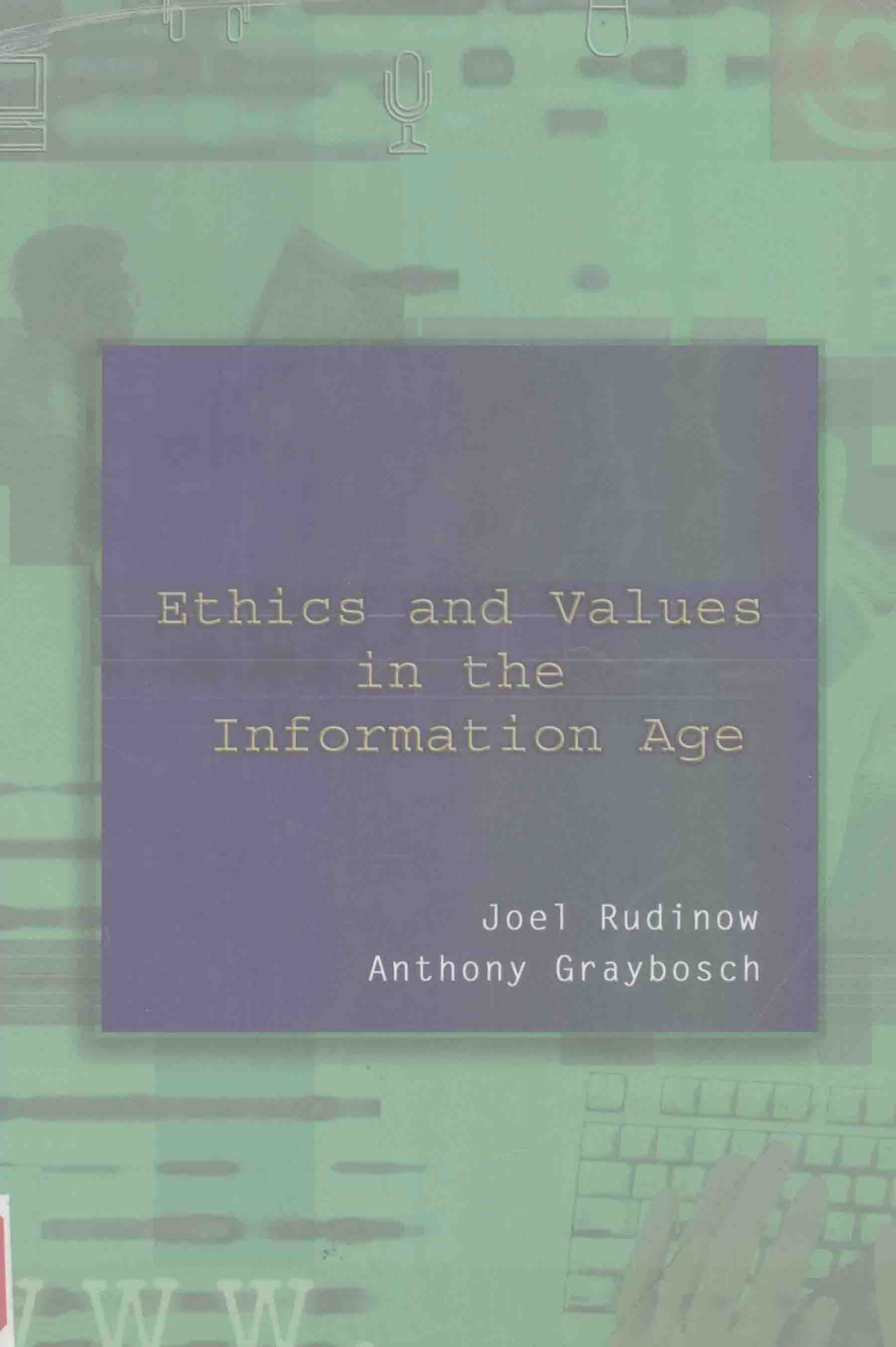

Ethics and Values in the Information Age

Joel Rudinow
Anthony Graybosch

Ethics and Values in the Information Age

WADSWORTH
THOMSON LEARNING

Acquisitions Editor: David Tatom
Development Editor: Scott Spoolman
Marketing Strategist: Steve Drummond
Project Manager: Suzie Wurzer
Project Editors: Jeannine Christensen and Rebekah Mercer

Manufacturing Manager: Elaine Curda
Art Director: Sue Hart
Copy Editor: Karen Keady
Compositor: GAC/Indianapolis
Printer: Malloy Lithographing

Printed in the United States of America
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 05 04 03 02 01

For more information about our products, contact us at:
Thomson Learning Academic Resource Center
1-800-423-0563

For permission to use material from this text, contact us by:
Phone: 1-800-730-2214
Fax: 1-800-730-2215
Web: http://www.thomsonrights.com

ISBN: 0-15-507956-5
Library of Congress Number: 20-01091588

Asia
Thomson Learning
60 Albert Street, #15-01
Albert Complex
Singapore 189969

Australia
Nelson Thomson Learning
102 Dodds Street
South Melbourne, Victoria 3205
Australia

Canada
Nelson Thomson Learning
1120 Birchmount Road
Toronto, Ontario M1K 5G4
Canada

Europe/Middle East/Africa
Thomson Learning
Berkshire House
168-173 High Holborn
London WC1 V7AA
United Kingdom

Latin America
Thomson Learning
Seneca, 53
Colonia Polanco
11560 Mexico D.F.
Mexico

Spain
Paraninfo Thomson Learning
Calle/Magallanes, 25
28015 Madrid, Spain

This is dedicated to the ones we love.

About the Editors

Joel Rudinow received his B.A. in Philosophy from the University of California at Santa Barbara, and his Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of British Columbia. He has held faculty appointments at the University of Western Ontario, Dartmouth College, and Sonoma State University. He is currently Chair of the Department of Philosophy at Santa Rosa Junior College and co-author of *Invitation to Critical Thinking*.

Anthony Graybosch is Professor of Philosophy at California State University—Chico. He has taught at Mount Senario College in Wisconsin and at the University of Central Oklahoma. He has held Fulbright Lectureships at Tel Aviv University, Eotvos Lorand University in Budapest, and the University of Gdansk. He received his B.A. from Fordham University and his Ph.D. from The City University of New York.

INTRODUCTION

Many significant historical moments or periods have come to be identified with some central theme or concept—the Age of Reason, the Summer of Love, the Industrial Revolution. "Information" has become the defining concept of our moment in history. We live in the information age. The label is fairly recent, only about twenty years old.[i] In part, the label points to the revolutionary explosion of information technology—so predominant in our age that it now often goes by the ironically awesome acronym IT. Thanks to IT, we now enjoy—individually as human beings, citizens, consumers, etc. and collectively as a species—capabilities to gather, store, transmit, receive, sort, analyze, and otherwise process information in quantities, at speeds, and across distances unimaginably greater than at any other time or place in world history.

To put this in perspective, consider that for most of human history—more than two million years before anyone thought of IT—oral speech and gesture were the only means of communication among humans. Writing, which allowed communication across distances in space and time, emerged about six thousand years ago. Printing, which permitted communication with mass audiences, emerged only 500 years ago in the fifteenth century. Only in the twentieth century did mass distribution of integrated audio-visual-textual (multimedia) material become possible through the development of film, video, audio-recording, radio and television broadcast technologies.[ii]

The concept of information is of course much older than the label. Steven Lubar, in his introduction to the "Information Age" exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, notes a cartoon published in 1903 depicting a merger maniac business tycoon surrounded by "information machines. A newspaper and stock ticker brings him information from markets around the world. Two telegraph messengers have fallen asleep on a bench, exhausted from their efforts. His son, or perhaps his office assistant, is on the telephone, relaying orders to buy or sell, or perhaps sending instructions to his subordinates back at the office. His wife—or is it his secretary?—sits at a typewriter, ready to take down memos or letters."[iii] Recent technological innovations such as the microchip, fiber-optics, and satellite communications may have elevated information to Age-definitive status, but the new technologies have their Industrial Age antecedents and certainly the concept of information has had a long career.

From the Latin *informare,* "information" means literally "that which gives form to thought," but its "extensional" meaning—the things it is conventionally taken to be a label for—has evolved, especially as it has come front and center in the information age. Fifty years ago the label information would have referred to such mundane and humble matters of fact as a person's phone number or the correct answer to a question used on *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* Now anything (text, graphics, sound, computer code,

what-have-you) that can be encoded for transmission through any medium of IT qualifies as information.[iv]

Technology is certainly one important dimension of this picture. However, here we can begin to glimpse changes at a more profound level. The information age cannot adequately be characterized simply in terms of a revolution in technology. It is also, and just as importantly, a revolution in collective consciousness. Twenty years ago, who knew what e-mail or a twenty-gigabyte hard drive was? Now these and many other related neologisms are part of the shared vocabulary of much of the world's population. As one of our authors, James Boyle, observes, along with the revolution in technology a wholesale conceptual reconstruction process is now underway. This conceptual reconstruction process produces not just new words, but new conceptual schemes—new ideologies, new legislation, new justifications—for new regimes, new arrangements, new obligations; new distributions of burdens and benefits, new rights, new wrongs. It raises new ethical puzzles and dilemmas, and new versions of old ethical puzzles and dilemmas.[v] Thus the subject of this book: ethical issues in which the concept of information plays some important role.

As we shall see, this brings two significant and hitherto separate areas of applied ethics together: media ethics and computer ethics. Ethics is the branch of philosophy that has to do with morality—justice, fairness, right and wrong. Applied ethics is an approach to ethics in which abstract theoretical considerations are placed in the context of their relevance to real life situations. Both media ethics and computer ethics originated as varieties of professional ethics—ethics as applied to one or another professional, occupational, or career path. Media ethics began as a part of the training of professional journalists; and computer ethics has arisen in education for the burgeoning computer industry. Because the training for each of these occupational areas is rather specialized, courses of instruction in Media Ethics and Computer Ethics have so far generally been developed and taught separately from each other, in spite of the fact that they share information as their crucial conceptual foundation.

The centrality and importance of this common conceptual foundation can perhaps best be appreciated from the point of view of political philosophy, where it is generally understood that the flow of information is fundamental to determining the structure and exercise of political power. A basic premise, for example, of classical liberal theory of democracy is the essential value of "freedom of information." One example is Jefferson's famous reliance upon a "well *informed* citizenry" as a condition for a well functioning democracy. Jefferson famously said, "I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves, and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them but to *inform* their discretion by education."[vi] Thus it is easy to appreciate, from the point of view of political theory, how high-speed global access to information now made possible via the Internet gives rapid rise to a host of new ethical issues regarding security, privacy, secrecy, international sovereignty, and so on. By the same token, the central functional purposes of the press have traditionally had to do with the flow of information. Thus the central principles of a professional ethic for journalism seem also to flow naturally from an analysis of information—its nature and its importance in the conduct of human affairs.

We were made vividly aware of the convergence of media ethics and computer ethics by an episode at one of our home institutions that eventually rose to the level of a national story and a potential Supreme Court case. What began as a controversy

about an advertisement in the student newspaper, and the right to publicly demonstrate in opposition to the paper's editorial policies, soon found its way into school-sponsored online discussion groups, some of which had been designated as confidential gender-exclusive chat rooms. When a "whistleblower" leaked certain personally offensive messages from one of the confidential discussions, the college became embroiled in a sexual harassment case that raised several intriguing issues all at once, some of which had Constitutional relevance and significance. Should a school-sponsored discussion be restricted by gender, or by a confidentiality rule? If so, how binding should such restrictions be? Can one conscientiously break an agreement to hold certain communications in confidence, and if so under what circumstances? Should the college faculty or administration be held responsible for offensive material published in a student newspaper? Should the college faculty or administration be held responsible for offensive messages posted to an on-line discussion group? Should an online discussion group be understood and treated in the same way as a classroom discussion, or as the letters to the editor section of the student newspaper, or as something else entirely? We will be exploring this case and the nest of issues it raises more deeply in Chapters 2 and 11. At the outset, however, let us just notice the convergence of ethical issues in journalism with ethical issues in the management of new and emerging forms of electronic communication.

A marvelous example, showing again how inextricably intertwined these two areas of applied ethics have become—if for no other reason than the degree to which information technology is revolutionizing mass media journalism—was furnished to us by the American presidential election of 2000. On November 7, election day, shortly before 8 p.m. EST, in the closest presidential race in American history, all of the major television networks estimated that Vice President Al Gore had beaten Texas Gov. George W. Bush in the key state of Florida. But as the night wore on and results came in from the state's Panhandle region, networks were forced to retract that estimate. Meanwhile, the race remained extraordinarily close across the nation. Gore took the battleground states of Pennsylvania, Michigan and Illinois; Bush claimed Ohio, Tennessee and Missouri. Eventually it became clear that whichever candidate won Florida would win the electoral votes necessary to claim the presidency. About 2:15 the following morning, the major networks called Florida and the election for Bush. Gore, hearing that he probably would lose Florida by about 50,000 votes, called Bush to concede the election. Forty-five minutes later, en route to a rally in Nashville to make a public concession speech, Gore learned that Bush's lead in Florida had shrunk dramatically to only a few thousand votes. By 4:15 a.m., the major networks were forced to retract their estimate that Bush had been elected. Questions had already arisen in public debate over how responsible the coverage of the election had been, and over the possibility that the coverage itself might have unduly influenced the electoral contest. Within hours, allegations of voting and vote-counting "irregularities," in addition to the narrow emerging margin of victory, had given rise to automatic machine recounts and requests for manual recounts in several Florida counties. Questions quickly arose in public debate over the relative reliability and integrity of machine (that is, computer) tabulation versus manual tabulation of votes. Over the next five weeks federal and state courts heard a tangle of issues and arguments in an escalating drama as gripping and difficult to follow as any of John Grisham's best stories. Finally, in an extraordinary late-night decision, a deeply divided United States Supreme Court over-ruled a deeply divided Florida State Supreme Court, saying in effect that the recounts ordered by the state Supreme Court violated the United States Constitution's Equal Protection

principle, but also that too little time remained in the electoral process to conduct recounts in accordance with that principle—in effect awarding Florida's votes in the electoral college, and thus also the election, to George W. Bush. Throughout the entire process, people all around the world could log onto any of a host of web sites—the Cable News Network (CNN), National Public Radio (NPR), among many others—and follow the entire story on-line. (This narrative of the sequence of events, for example, was itself derived from CNN's on-line chronology.) Anyone with Internet access could read the full text of each court decision—complete with all of the concurring and dissenting opinions—within minutes of its release to the public. Members of the American public could sample the international coverage of their own electoral adventure in progress.

Suffice to say, we think that the time is clearly right to focus in applied ethics on the concept of information—on new ethical issues that the revolution in information technology is pushing to the top of the agenda, and on new twists older ethical issues are taking on in the information age. That is precisely what we will be doing in this book.

In Chapter 1, From Walden to DotComGuy, we give an overview of the revolution in collective consciousness brought on by the revolution in information technology. We consider the impact of information technology on ethics in business and the ethical implications of information technology's globalizing influence, as well as some of what may become lost to us through information technology's ascendancy.

In Chapters 2 and 3 we explore freedom of information as the conceptual ground of several of the fundamental principles of ethics in journalism: the principles of freedom of expression and freedom of the press, and ideals of press performance such as newsworthiness, objectivity, accuracy, impartiality, and balance.

In Chapters 4, 5, and 6 we focus on the economic structure of the institutions that have come to serve as primary information delivery systems, on the role and impact of commercial advertising in mass media, and on the preeminence of entertainment values in mass media programming. In this connection we explore some special applications of ethics to several controversial categories of entertainment and cultural material: comedy, pornography, representations of violence in the news, and in popular music.

In Chapters 7 and 8 we look at issues regarding access to information. We explore the concept of privacy, as the right to control access to information about oneself, and the closely associated concepts of secrecy and confidentiality, as these apply not only to individuals but to large organizations, including the political state. In Chapter 9 our exploration of information access extends into the area of intellectual property, as we consider the right to own information. In Chapter 10 this discussion is extended into the area of security of information, as we consider the impact of information technology on issues of national security and the conduct of warfare and other forms of conflict.

In Chapter 11 we explore the impact of information technology in several areas of intimate and otherwise personal life. We look at how information technology is affecting interpersonal relationships and communication. We explore some of the ways in which information technology is affecting the formation and maintenance of personal identity. Finally, we contemplate the future of human civilization in the unfolding age of information.

Each of the readings in this book is followed by exercises and/or case studies. Some of these are based on actual cases; some are hypothetical. They may be used as prompts for class or study group discussion activities or as essay assignments. Each chapter concludes with a short list of recommended additional readings.

Often throughout this book we refer you to Internet sites. Internet resources are inherently less stable than the book you're now holding in your hand. This is both exciting and troublesome. An exciting thing is that new information and materials are always turning up on the Internet. One of the troubles has to do with changes of Internet address, otherwise known as "broken links." We want to help our readers—both students and their instructors—make effective use of the Internet in connection with this book. To that end, here are your authors' academic and Internet addresses:

Anthony Graybosch
Department of Philosophy
CSU Chico
Chico, CA 95929-0730
email: agraybosch@csuchico.edu
Internet site:
http://www.csuchico.edu/~graybosc

Joel Rudinow
Department of Philosophy
Santa Rosa Junior College
1501 Mendocino Ave.
Santa Rosa, CA 95401
email: jrudinow@santarosa.edu
Internet site:
http://online.santarosa.edu/
homepage/jrudinow/

We welcome you to visit our web sites. Look for the Ethics and Values in the Information Age (EVIA) link. We will be maintaining up to date links (as best we can) to the Internet resources referenced in the text, and we will be adding new links as we learn of them. We welcome you to contact us with suggestions for new additional links, and of course to bring broken links to our attention.

We are hoping that instructors and students of both media ethics and computer ethics will see the value in approaching their courses and studies within a framework defined by the concept of information. As a practical matter, journalistic ethics education must come to terms sooner or later with the radical transformation that the profession of journalism, like so many others, is undergoing in the information age. At the same time we suggest that computer ethics may well find itself usefully broadened and deepened by consideration of its affinities with media ethics. Beyond these two already charted areas of the curricular landscape, we see in the collection of readings assembled here the contours and outlines of an emerging area for applied philosophy generally. Although many of our selections were written by professionals and lay persons in disciplines and occupations other than academic philosophy, we have been struck by the abundant renewed relevance of traditional philosophical themes and preoccupations to the promises and challenges presented by the emerging information environment. Accordingly, it is our hope that the discipline of academic philosophy will find fertile ground in information age ethical issues for the application of its special skills and techniques.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In 1996 an adjunct professor of philosophy at a small campus of a rather large state university system organized a panel discussion at one of the three regional conferences of the American Philosophical Association (APA). The session was entitled "Promises and Pitfalls of Cyberia University." Educators and philosophers of education joined in discussing the pros and cons of "distance learning" and other initiatives incorporating new information and communications technologies into the schools and colleges. Panel leader Joel Rudinow, co-author of a textbook in critical thinking, had a few ideas about building interactive tutorial support software for his critical thinking classes. He also had some deep-seated reservations about the new technology and its impact on the highly personal processes of teaching and learning. Coincidentally, at the same conference, another panel had been assembled under the auspices of the APA's Committee on Computers and Philosophy. Two of the members of this panel, Ron Barnette of Valdosta State University in Georgia, and Jon Dorbolo, of Oregon State University, had done pioneering work developing Internet-based scholarly and instructional resources for philosophy as a discipline. The three of them wound up going out to dinner together and kicking around some ideas for various experiments in pedagogy and curriculum design involving new technologies. Inspired by these discussions, Joel Rudinow returned to Sonoma State University and wrote grant proposals for a project entitled Ethics and Values in the Information Age (EVIA). The goals of the EVIA project were to create a new college course on Information Age ethical issues and to teach the course in a multicampus learning community using as many of the new tools of information and communication technology as he could get his hands on. The next step was to enlist colleagues from other campuses of the California State University system. First to join the project was Anthony Graybosch, then Chair of the Philosophy Department and Director of Center for Applied and Professional Ethics at the Chico campus. The course was initially offered in the spring semester of 1997 on the campuses of Chico State University, Sonoma State University, and San Jose State University. This book grew out of the reading list for that initial course.

Like any project of this size, this book owes a great deal to a great many people. The EVIA project began with seed funding from the Sonoma State University Academic Innovation Fund and eventually was awarded major funding from the California State University Academic Opportunity Fund. We wish to thank these institutions for their support. In addition we wish to thank Phil Clayton, chair of the philosophy department at Sonoma State University for his early support of the project, as well as Michael Donovan and Sean Martin, for taking charge of the course and keeping it alive at Sonoma State University in subsequent years. We are grateful to our project evaluator, Michael Scriven, for his involvement, advice and encouragement. We are especially indebted to David Tatom at Harcourt College Publishers for recognizing the potential of a book to support the course, and to our development editor Scott Spoolman for his patience and support while we got the manuscript together (we are, to put it mildly, somewhat behind our original schedule). Thanks also to Jeannine Christensen and Rebekah Mercer for escorting us through the production process and for their attention to detail. We thank all of the contributors for their wonderful words and for their permission to include their works here as well as Marilyn Gallaty for transcribing Ben Bagdikian's lecture. We are grateful to Deni Elliott of the University of Montana, James Huchingson of Florida International University, Tom Mullin of Eastern Washington University, and

Robert J. Schihl, of Regent University for their comments and suggestions for improvement on the first draft of our manuscript.

NOTES

[i]Historians date the Stone Age as 2,400,000–4000 B.C.; The Metal Ages as 4000 B.C.–1000 C.E.; the Age of Water and Wind as 1000–1732; the Industrial Revolution as 1733–1878; the Age of Electricity as 1879–1946; the Electronic Age as 1947–1972; and the Information Age from 1973 on. See Bunch, Bryan H., and Alexander Hellemans, *The Timetables of Technology: a Chronology of the Most Important People and Events in the History of Technology,* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

[ii]See Robert C. Davis, "The Impact of Mass Communication," in Melvin Kranzberg and Carroll W. Pursell Jr., eds., *Technology in Western Civilization,* vol. 2, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 323–ff.

[iii]Steven Lubar, *InfoCulture: The Smithsonian Book of Information Age Inventions,* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), p. 1.

[iv]Cf. Theodore Roszak, *The Cult of Information,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), Ch. 1 "Information, Please," pp. 3–20.

[v]James Boyle, *Shamans, Software, and Spleens: Law and the Construction of the Information Society,* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. ix–ff.

[vi]Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to William C. Jarvis", September 28, 1806, emphasis added, in Edward Dumbauld, ed., *The Political Writings of Thomas Jefferson;* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1955), pp. 93–ff; Cf. Judith Lichtenberg, ed., *Democracy and the Mass Media,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 81, 91, 110, 155, 290–291, 299, 361.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1

ETHICS INFORMATIONALIZED: FROM WALDEN TO DOTCOMGUY

My purpose in going to Walden Pond was not to live cheaply nor to live dearly there, but to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles; to be hindered from accomplishing which for want of a little common sense, a little enterprise and business talent; appeared not so sad as foolish.[1]

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

INTRODUCTION

Approximately one hundred fifty years ago on July 4, 1845, Henry David Thoreau retreated from Concord society and established residence in a one-room dwelling a mile outside of town. Here he pursued an experiment in living in order to determine how to spend his life. After a little more than two years he left because he "had other lives to live." Thoreau tells us that the total cost of his modest home was $28.125[2] and boasts of using borrowed material rather than purchasing all the tools needed for his home construction project. Today DotComGuy retreats into his two-bedroom townhouse from which he will broadcast his life live for a year on the Internet. DotComGuy's computer will cost significantly more than Thoreau's retreat even adjusting for inflation and including a rebate of $400 for signing a three-year Internet access contract with CompuServe. His $90,000 salary, however, is certainly higher than Thoreau's wages.

Many of us will choose to follow DotComGuy and invite a computer into our home rather than take a walk around Walden Pond. Although we could do both, the time many people spend with the computer eats into an already busy schedule. Even the trustees of Walden Pond realize that humans have little time for walks. The