Editorial

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Technologies related to identities such as biometrics, profiling, and a range of surveillance tools, in combination with a variety of identification procedures and personalized services, are ever more ubiquitous and pervasive. ‘Identity’ is the central concept around which these technologies revolve: Access, rights, responsibilities, benefits and risks are apportioned on the basis of the ‘identities’ of individuals. Identities are formed on the basis of personal data that is collected and stored in databases. This raises ethical questions concerning privacy, erroneous administrative classifications of individuals, stereotyping and the limits of persons’ capacity for self-presentation and self-definition.

Oscar Gandy already observed in 1993 that there is a complex selection mechanism present in modern societies—that he refers to as ‘the panoptic sort’—that is “used to coordinate and control their access to the goods and services that define life in the modern capitalist economy.” By making use of technology, government and corporations can reach more people more efficiently. This, of course, is not entirely new; what is new, however, is the extent to which this practice can be supported and enhanced, and integrated into existing government and business practices. Information technology (IT) offers numerous solutions and new possibilities for enhancing services, improving efficiency, and creating new, and often interactive, democratic, and participative ways of communication. The downside to these promising opportunities: critics warn that the Internet and the availability and application of a range of information technologies is

leading to an increase of social sorting (Gandy), anti-democratic developments and uniformity in behavior and views (Sunstein).

On the one hand IT has become the medium, and at the same time the environment, in which identities are formed; people express their identities in blogs, online fora, and video’s, and construct new identities in virtual worlds and massive social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace. On the other hand, IT is used to identify and manage these identities (Identity Management). Consider for example patient record systems, population registration systems, systems in the area of criminal justice and homeland security, commercial databases, marketing, and click stream data held by Google. In addition, profiles are created to improve efficiency, safety, and service. Who we are in these contexts is shaped for a large part by the ways in which we are represented in these systems and technologies. This warrants the careful consideration from an ethical perspective of the collecting, mining, storing and use of personal information.

The collection of papers in this special issue are selected from the international conference on ‘Ethics, Technology, and Identity’ hosted by Delft University of Technology in June 2008. Topics addressed during this conference include:

Which conceptions of identity are used when addressing ethical issues regarding information technology? How can the concepts of ‘identity’ and ‘identification’ be understood from a philosophical perspective when discussing morally problematic developments in information technology? What are the philosophical semantics pertaining to reference and identification which may help clarify ambiguities and ethical issues? How can we arrive at a normatively sound conception of personal identity as

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a starting point for the study of the ethical aspects of the (information) technology that is shaping our lives?

In this issue we will take a closer look at the different conceptualizations of 'identity' and 'Identity Management' in the context of IT (Noëmi Manders-Huits). Robin Dillon connects the ethical issues related to IT and identity to the value of 'respect for person'. David Shoemaker argues that in issues of informational privacy the value of autonomy is paramount, namely the ability to manage the public presentation of one's self-identity. Gloria González Fuster shows that the use of 'inaccurate' data can potentially play a useful role to preserve the informational autonomy of the individual.

Katja de Vries and Niels van Dijk situate their papers in the context of Ambient Intelligence and Profiling. De Vries

argues that the way in which we experience ourselves necessarily goes through a moment of technical mediation. Van Dijk proposes to move away from a focus on entitlements to personal data, towards transparency with respect to the profiling process by which knowledge is produced from these data. Finally, Oscar Gandy underscores that future automated decision support systems must be subject to active and continuous assessment and regulation because of the ways in which they are likely to contribute to economic and social inequality.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all the participants of the conference for making it a great success, and to those who contributed to this issue for all their extra effort.