ON CODES OF ETHICS FOR WEB DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses Web design corporate codes of ethics and Web design professional organization codes of ethics to contrast and compare. An analyses of the codes is performed. The paper is for those interested in a sample of the current state of ethics in Web design and also those interested in having a code of ethics for Web design that designers can rely on when ethical decisions arise.

Keywords: Web Design, Code of Ethics, Code of Conduct, Ethics.

INTRODUCTION

With the differentiation of computer science and information systems into different computing disciplines, such as IT, new ethical issues arise that require discipline specific codes of conduct . With more Web design companies publicly stating their corporate codes of ethics and with the pervasiveness and impact of the Internet, a set of ethical codes is needed for Web designers to rely on in making every day decisions. This paper looks at the ethics codes for 14 Web design firms and three professional Web organizations in order to get a better idea of the current state of ethics codes in Web design.

CORPORATE AND PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION CODES

Codes of ethics can be grouped into two categories, corporate codes and codes for professional organizations. For example the Google Code of Conduct [5] would be categorized as a corporate code while the ACM Code of Ethics [1] would be categorized as a code for professional organizations. A search on the Internet using three search engines, Google, Yahoo, and Bing on the search terms "Web Design Code of Ethics" found 14 Web Design firms with published codes of ethics in the top 100 returned results from each search engine. Those companies whose codes that were copied from existing codes (such as the ACM Code of Ethics) and those companies whose codes contained fewer than five

codes were not counted in the 14. Three well known international Web design professional organizations were also chosen for comparison. (See Table 1).

CLIENT VS. USER

The codes of ethics are categorized as shown in the Appendix, Table 1. They are grouped into corporate codes of ethics and Web design professional organization codes of ethics. It is clear from Table 1 that corporate codes are overwhelmingly concerned with the Web designer's clients (85 out of 135 codes or around 64% concerned the client), while Web design professional organization codes are concerned with neither the clients nor the Web users (only 1/21 or around 5% concerned Web design clients, while 2/21 or around 10% concerned the Web user).

An important ethical issue for Web designers is whether or not the interests of the client outweigh the interests of the user. This is an issue that appears often in practice. For example, the first ethical code for "whomadeyourwebsite.com" states:

"I will use client needs and interests as my guiding force."

This is a strong statement in favor of client interests. What happens when the client's interests conflict with the user's interests? As a simple, yet common example, suppose the client would like to gather email information for advertising purposes. They would like an "opt-out" checkbox placed in a rather obscure area of the Web page in order to gain consent. As a Web developer, do you comply? The interests of the client say you should, yet the interests of the user say you should not. If you work for whomadeyourwebsite.com, the answer is clear. Guidance on this issue can be given by existing organizational codes. The Joint Software Engineering Code of Ethics and Professional Practice (JSECOEPP) [11] was created by two of the oldest and most respected computing organizations, the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE). It was not created specifically for Web designers, but can

give guidance on this issue. The first two codes in the JSECOEPP state:

- "Software engineers shall act consistently with the public interest" and

- "Software engineers shall act in a manner that is in the best interests of their client and employer, consistent with the public interest".

In other words, the JSECOEPP emphasizes the public interest first and the interests of the client second. Does this mean that "public interest" is synonymous with "Web site user's interests"? In a broad sense, this is probably true. If the Web site is used by the community at large, then the "public interest" is probably synonymous with "user's interests". If the Web site has a more narrow focus, then this may or may not be true. For example, if a Web developer was creating a pornographic site then " user's interests" might be quite different than the "public interest".

What is surprising in Table 1 is the lack of Web design organization codes of ethics that specify behaviors towards either Web designer's clients or the users of the developed Web pages. Sixteen out of twenty-one (or around 76%) of the professional Web design organization's codes involved neither Web design clients nor Web users, while only 25/135 or around 18.5% of the corporate codes involved neither the Web design client or the Web user. What does this mean? It means that the corporate codes are providing more detailed guidance on protecting the interests of the Web design clients and the Web design users than the professional Web design organization codes.

DISCIPLINE SPECIFIC CODES

Table 2 shows the breakdown between codes that pertain specifically to computing and those that do not. What is surprising is that there is a clear bias in the professional Web organization codes towards those that do not pertain to computing. Only three out of 21 (or around 15%) of the codes pertain specifically to computing. What then are the ethical issues addressed by Web design organizations? Most of them are similar to the ACM's General Imperatives. For example, one of the International Webmasters Associations codes of ethics [9] states:

"To strive to attain and to express a sincerity of character that shall enrich our human contacts, ever

aiming toward that ideal--The Practice of the Golden Rule."

While this certainly is a worthwhile code, it is not specific to Web design or even computing in general. Many of the professional Web design organization codes were similar to this example. Such generalized codes allow for a wide range of interpretation and do not provide much guidance when a decision must be made. James Moor In "What is Computer Ethics?" [16] argues that computer ethics is needed to be able to handle normative issues that arise from the use of computing technology. In other words, there should be codes of ethics for computing that look quite different than other codes of ethics. This is clearly not the case for the organizational codes studied in this paper.

In defense of professional Web design organizations, it is not always easy to come up with general codes that are discipline specific. In the paper "Code of Ethics. Which One?" [15], the author makes the salient point "Fitting one set of standards to a wide range of professionals operating in different environments may remain elusive." An argument can be made that since Web design professional organization codes apply to the discipline in general, they should act as a framework for creating corporate codes of ethics and therefore should be general. This may be true, but where Web design professional organization codes (and computing codes in general) seem to be lacking is that they tend not to be discipline specific and do not provide much guidance in issues that pertain uniquely to the discipline, in this case designing Web pages. In other words, they do not apply James Moor's uniqueness of "Computer Ethics".

Corporate codes tend to be more evenly split between those that emphasize computing issues (39 out of 135 or around 29% and those that emphasize business related issues (96 out of 135 or around 71%). For example, a code of Altherr Web Design , LLC [3] states:

" To provide helpful solutions to sales and support requests"

Many of the corporate codes that did not involve computing are of a similar nature and involve business related issues concerning the corporate clients as opposed to general moral imperatives saturating the professional Web design organization codes.

In their paper " A Uniform Code of Ethics: Business and IT Professional Ethics" [17], Payne and Landry argue for a unified code of ethics for CS, IS, and IT. It

is not likely, however, that unifying codes will have the effect of creating discipline specific codes, especially in the light of the differentiation that is taking place between the computing disciplines.

CONCLUSIONS

The breakdown between client oriented codes and user oriented codes illustrates the need for more corporate and organizational ethical codes protecting the rights of Web users. The breakdown between codes involving computing and codes that do not involve computing illustrates the need for more discipline specific codes. Codes that are not discipline specific do not provide enough guidance when it comes time to make an ethical decision. This study involved a small, but somewhat random sample of corporate codes of ethics. This does not mean that this study is not valid, however, further research using a larger sample is needed to verify these conclusions.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Comparing "client oriented" codes with "user oriented" codes

	Codes Concerning the Web Client	Codes Concerning the Web User	Both	Neither
Corporate				
Aldebaren	3	2		1
Altherr Web Design, LLC	7	1		
DCNicholls	8	1		1
JoeDonellyDesign	15	1		4
K & K Houston	5			3
Lenetek	2			6
RJM Web Design	4	4		5
SiteTutor.com	6			
Visualscope LLC	4		2	
Web-aviso	4	1		1
Website Service Studio	2		8	2
WhoMadeYourSite.com	20	2	1	1
Zizinya Web Solutions	6	1		1
Total	**86**	**13**	**11**	**25**
Web Design Organizations				
International Webmasters Association	1		1	5
Web Design and Developers Association		1	1	8
Association of Web Design Professionals		1		3
Total	**1**	**2**	**2**	**16**

Table 2: Comparing codes that pertain to computing with those that do not pertain to computing

Corporate	Pertain to computing	Do not pertain to computing
Aldebaren	3	3
Altherr Web Design, LLC	2	6
DCNicholls	3	7
JoeDonellyDesign	0	20
K & K Houston	0	8
Lenetek	0	8
RJM Web Design	9	4
SiteTutor.com	5	1
Visualscope LLC	1	5
Web-aviso	4	2
Website Service Studio	2	10
WhoMadeYourSite.com	4	20
Zizinya Web Solutions	6	2
Total	**39**	**96**
Web Design Organizations		
International Webmasters Association	0	7
Web Design and Developers Association	2	8
Association of Web Design Professionals	1	3
Total	**3**	**18**