

Foundations of Information Ethics, edited by John T.F. Burgess and Emily J.M. Knox

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Volume 6, 2020

Special Focus on Academic Libraries and the Irrational
Dossier thématique sur les bibliothèques universitaires et l'irrationnel

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074053ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v6.34773>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians / Association
Canadienne des Bibliothécaires en Enseignement Supérieur

ISSN

2369-937X (digital)

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Cite this review

Fuhr, J. (2020). Review of [Foundations of Information Ethics, edited by John T.F. Burgess and Emily J.M. Knox]. *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship / Revue canadienne de bibliothéconomie universitaire*, 6, 1–3.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v6.34773>

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Book Review: *Foundations of Information Ethics*

Burgess, John T.F., and Emily J. M. Knox, eds. (2019). *Foundations of Information Ethics*. Chicago: ALA, 168pp, \$54.99 USD.

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Keywords: *information ethics*

As monolithic tech companies like Amazon and Facebook face scrutiny over information gathering and misuse, the ethics of information demands our attention. John T. F. Burgess and Emily J. M. Knox's edited textbook *Foundations of Information Ethics* is an excellent and timely introduction to the ethics of information in an age of data leaks, misinformation, social media, and precision marketing. The book is organized into twelve concise chapters and touches on many aspects of information ethics, including privacy, intellectual property, cybersecurity, and human rights.

The editors succeed in introducing novices to information ethics. Each chapter provides related key terms and concepts, as well as great bibliographies for further reading. These, along with additional resources, serve as an accessible reference list for readers interested in learning more about the chapter's focus and explore concepts in more detail. The text moves beyond theory and into praxis by offering case studies in many of the chapters. As well, discussion questions give the reader a chance to think about nuances to ideas raised throughout the text. These features offer great course material for an instructor wishing to include this text as part of their syllabus.

Burgess and Knox are certainly qualified to write on the subject. Both are professors in information studies departments and are involved in groups and associations related to information ethics, censorship, and intellectual freedom. The rest of the authors are largely faculty members, in the fields of information studies, information technology, ethics, and education. Robert Hauptman, founder of the *Journal of Information Ethics*, provides the book's foreword. As Hauptman notes in the book's foreword, very few books on information ethics exist, as the majority of information ethics literature appears in serials. Bearing this in mind along with the

discussion questions mentioned above, the book lends itself to be used as a textbook in a graduate-level information ethics course.

The first and third chapters are authored by Burgess and touch on moral philosophical frameworks and the history of information ethics respectively. In the first chapter, Burgess aptly describes deontology, consequentialism, character ethics, and contractual ethics, and situates them in an information studies context. The second chapter addresses the ways in which human rights supports information ethics. In the third chapter, Burgess offers a “conceptual primer” (25) to the history of information ethics. This is useful for those new to ethics and provides ample background to dive into ethical considerations related to information. Following the introductory chapters, specific topics are covered, including access, privacy, discourse, intellectual property, data, and cybersecurity. The authors of these chapters expertly navigate and situate information ethics within each specific topic.

The text is not without fault, however. In chapter 6, Ethics of Discourse, John M. Budd does not provide a concise review of what constitutes discourse analysis. In fact, no review of the concept exists in the text. Rather, Budd suggests readers to review his article “Discourse Analysis and the Study of Communication in LIS,” published in 2006 by *Library Trends*. No doubt his chapter in *Foundations of Information Ethics* would have benefitted the readers with an introduction to discourse analysis before exploring the ethics of discourse.

The proceeding chapters cover information ethics globally, including cognitive justice (chapter 10) and global digital citizenship (chapter 11). These chapters offer a balanced approach to information ethics globally by offering a full range of forms of knowledge or what Fischer and Klazar call an “ecology of knowledges” (104), such as indigenous knowledge.

One of the most useful and interesting chapters is the final one on emerging issues in information ethics. Amelia Gibson, an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina School of Information and Library Science, highlights a number of emerging issues of information ethics, including artificial intelligence, precision marketing, and open data. Gibson rightly points out that while emerging technology has brought particular issues to the forefront, they are rooted in social and ethical conflicts of the past. However, each issue is only touched on in a single paragraph. While these may be conflicts of the past, since they are highly relevant for today’s audience, more time could be devoted to dissecting them and an even stronger, more convincing chapter would have emerged.

Foundations of Information Ethics is written for a broad audience and lends itself to students, non-scholars, and career-level information professionals wanting

an introduction to information ethics. Those needing to know critical terms and core concepts of information ethics would do well to pick up this text. However, due to its introductory and accessible nature, very few substantive discussions are raised throughout the book. While this book would be suitable for students and practitioners, it may be too introductory for faculty members who are actively engaged in information ethics research.

Foundations of Information Ethics is an excellent guidebook throughout its 156 pages. Burgess and Knox have gathered an impressive group of authors to provide an introduction to the complex field of information ethics. As we continue to develop in-depth online infrastructure and communities, and as monolithic corporations gather data on global citizens, information ethics will have increased significance. Given this context, *Foundations of Information Ethics* provides a much-needed foundation on which more literature can be published in the future.