

Prof. Dr. Sabine Ammon, Wenzel Mehnert

On roles and challenges of ethics-practitioners

Towards a code of conduct



Introduction

The integration of ethics into the development of technologies is meant to transform the way technology is developed. **But it is also changing ethics.**

Ethics is not anymore confined to the academic schools of philosophy, **but ethicists work** with or in **laboratories, R&D institutes,** and technological **companies.**

The number of **technology ethics practitioners** is growing.

A **code of conduct** supports the **professionalization of technology ethics** and acknowledge that it needs normative guidance over and above standards for academic research.

We take a code of conduct as...

... an **agreement among members of a professional association**, umbrella group, or a single organization, in which they agree to act in a certain way. Such codes are typically developed in professions or trades that are not regulated by a governmental institution.

This agreement includes actions of **how members act towards each other** and the association, as well as **how they act towards external stakeholders**.

Anheier and List (2005, 57)

Carson, Baetz, and McGill (2008, 2)

Who is a CoC good for?

A code of conduct could be of use to **technology ethics practitioners** and partners, collaborators and other stakeholders to **manage expectations**.

There is a need for a more **targeted agreement about the actions** of technology ethics practitioners. Acknowledgment that such practitioners work outside of academia gives further support for aiming at a **code of conduct separate from those for academic researchers**.

A code of conduct for technology ethics practitioners can furthermore play a useful role in **agreement about actions toward external stakeholders** such as clients and societies.

What a CoC could address...

- (1) Express the values technology ethics practitioners hold:** honesty, transparency, a commitment to keeping up our knowledge bases, and helping clients with taking into account the interests of society.
- (2) Concerns regarding the consultant client relationship:** TEPs have responsibilities towards society, not only client or partner, thus also conducting research for other stakeholders. It should be clear between the client and ethics practitioner how results and advice are implemented.
- (3) Addressing Ethics Washing:** A code of conduct can lay down what we see as **good technology ethics practices**, give **standards and role models**, introduce measures **to defend well-acting practitioners** and **avoid controversial practices**, and support that the results become advice clients act on.

Three different roles of Technology Ethics Practitioners

- 1) As a partner**, the ethicist is embedded in the team for the duration of the project. The ethicist contributes their knowledge and methodological competencies to the joint project and ethics expertise stands on equal footing with the expertise of the other team members.
- 2) As a facilitator**, the ethicist joins a project team for an ethical intervention or a series of interventions but is not themselves part of the project team. E.g. by conducting workshops with a company or organization, the ethicist supports the project team in identifying and addressing ethical issues of the ongoing project.
- 3) As a consultant**, the ethicist advises on or evaluates ethical issues as an external expert. The ethicist is not directly involved in the research and development process and is not part of the project team.

Helping practitioners navigate controversies and pitfalls

1) Checkbox ethics:

- Ethical implications of new technologies are evaluated according to fixed ethical principles and rules.
- Understanding ethics as mere evaluation frames the practice as yet another burden to be followed.
- Disregards the sociotechnical complexity of developing and deploying an emerging technology.

2) Ethics washing:

- Pretending to engage in ethical considerations or activities with the only purpose of improving how a company or application is perceived but not creating actual changes or actions.

3) Relation Management – Navigate between client and stakeholders:

- Raises the question of what responsibility ethicists have towards which stakeholders.
- Being financially dependent on the client can create power dynamics (external advisor), which runs the danger of creating biased results just to confirm the results expected.

A code of conduct ...

- ... helps to **clarify an ethicist's responsibility and ability** to act as a partner within a research project and also how they should behave **if recommendations are ignored or the development cannot be further supported.**
- ... helps to navigate the **independence** of the ethicist and the **responsibility towards other stakeholders.**
- ... allows to create a **professional self-understanding** of the discipline that **emphasizes the societal benefits** of innovation processes instead of framing ethics as yet another activity that restrains science and technology.

A code of conduct should not...

- ... become a document that can be waved for **fending off external criticism**.
- ... be used for a kind of **'meta ethics washing' of our field**;
- ... follow a checkbox logic but would need to be **more flexible and agile**, to cover the disperse field and situations of working (**Smolka, 2025**)

Towards a code of conduct – Next steps...

- A code should be supported by **defining clear mechanics for measuring compliance of individual practitioners.**
- Allow **intervening and sanctioning when** internal or external stakeholders suspect **practices that do not meet professional standards.**
- **Current challenge:** Identifying the organization that has the right institutional position and structure to run these mechanisms.
 - Society for Philosophy and Technology
 - Society for Applied Philosophy
 - American Philosophical Association
- Creating a code of conduct **may include building up the needed institutional infrastructure** in an organization.

Conclusion and Discussion

- Technology ethics has become increasingly constructive by contributing to technology development. **Writing a position paper on a code of conduct should in a similar vein be constructive.**
- This position paper is **a conversation starter** and **invitation** to technology ethics practitioners to **join this exploration of a code of conduct.**
- The next step is to **bring together the main stakeholders** ranging from the practitioners, the clients, and the representatives of associations who could endorse and host a code of conduct.
- “And to **meet at an international conference** in the field, such as the biennial conference of the **Society for Philosophy and Technology**, which we indeed should do.” (Vermaas, Ammon & Mehnert, 2025, p. 6)

Thank you very much.

The screenshot shows the Taylor & Francis Online interface for the article "Toward a code of conduct for technology ethics practitioners" in the Journal of Responsible Innovation, Volume 12, Issue 1. The article is by Pieter Vermaas, Sabine Ammon, and Wenzel Mehnert, published online on 20 Dec 2024. The page displays 770 views, 2 CrossRef citations, and 0 Altmetric scores. It includes a search bar, navigation links, and buttons for "Full Article", "View PDF", and "View EPUB".

