President's Message

I compose this issue of the President's Message from Kuala Lumpur, where I’m representing CSI and SEARCC at the Global Conference on Computing Ethics (GCCE 2012), organized by the Malaysian National Computer Confederation (MNCC). As I reflect upon the relevance of Computing Ethics in India as well as around the world, I see several emerging areas, some of which I will share with you.

Computing Ethics today has gone beyond its original definition, which was largely restricted to the computational role in areas such as scientific or business computing. Today, ICTs have become the most widely, diversely, and flexibly used technologies in the history of humankind. Networks—whether computer, human, or social—now span the world, posing a number of challenges to the established ways of communicating, learning, working, playing, or living. In many countries, including our own, the IT Industry has become not only a large employer of the best talent, but also the most prolific innovator of all time. On the flip side, issues of inappropriate use of ICTs ranging from unsafe content, cyber crime, cyber terrorism or cyber war, also threaten established structures of the economy, society, and polity.

Computing Ethics have to be seen through this prism of what ICT/IT represents today. When examined this way, computing ethics covers a fairly large area of intellectual content, including the traditional ethics and morality, law, politics, and business & social use of technology.

One of the most important roles of CSI’s mandate as a national computer society is in inculcating ethics amongst computing professionals. An important concept in this regard is that of a voluntary Code of Ethics (CoE) for members, which CSI did have from its early days. However, the explosive growth of the IT Industry in the last two decades may perhaps necessitate taking a new look at our CoE, and if necessary, enhancing its contemporary relevance. We also need to actively disseminate the CoE to our members, especially students, so that we bring up the next generations of IT professionals with a firm ethical base from which to operate as professionals. This will have lasting strategic benefits, and would be one of the most effective ways how CSI can contribute to our nation.

Another role that CSI can play at the social level is in developing and maintaining a set of guidelines for the use of computers in society. In India, there is some amount of confusion within different stakeholders—particularly amongst parents and teachers on the one hand, and youth and students on the other—on matters such as use of technology, online content monitoring, and child safety. CSI, as a users’ organization, certainly can and should play a role developing such guidelines.

At another level, there is also currently a national and international debate between different top-level stakeholders—such as Governments, Content Providers, Business, and Civil Society—on matters relating to content control vis-à-vis concerns such as national security and internal harmony. This is a matter that perhaps is difficult to settle for all times, and may need an ongoing negotiating mechanism at the national level. If such a mechanism is created, CSI, as a neutral, multistakeholder entity, can certainly play a role in it. In some countries, new national bodies are being proposed to play the role of the maintainer and disseminator of a national Voluntary Code of Conduct, but we have to choose our own model as appropriate.

Some of the conflict that we see today in this debate on contentious areas such as censorship has an ethical dimension as well. We do have examples of ethically superior models such as Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) in the purely technological realms of software creation, distribution, and ownership. It is interesting to observe that FOSS has been developed by practitioners—engineers, technologists, and programmers—their models. However, no similar models exist for the national-level governance of technology.

Given that these are technologies of the 21st Century, and that the traditional systems are trying to govern them using laws of the 20th and 19th centuries, and given further that there is a trans-generational disparity between the users (mostly the youth) and the administrators (typically the older generation), some of this conflict is inevitable.

It is time for the international community to consider framing of an entirely new legal framework for the governance of technology, perhaps modeled after the 1948 landmark legal instrument, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which boldly proclaimed a new and unprecedented vision and philosophy for humankind.

A similar bold, innovative, coherent, and forward-looking techno-legal framework may be necessary to govern ICTs, given their unique nature. The development of such a framework must be through an inclusive process with wide consultations between all relevant stakeholders. CSI, as a Civil Society organization representing several communities such as students, academia, researchers, and users, must gear itself up to participate in these processes and help achieve this vision.

With best wishes,

Satish Babu
President

Satish Babu
From : president@csi-india.org
Subject : President’s Desk
Date : 1st September, 2012

 CSI Communications | September 2012 | 3