ACM Code of Ethics Essay

The ACM Code of Ethics is meant to establish an establish an ethical protocol that all members should follow while developing and designing the future technologies of the world, however, in this paper I will discuss how it is possible for a moral and honest person should not follow one of the imperatives that is laid out in the code. Imperative 3.5 states that “a member should articulate and support policies that protect the dignity of users and others affected by a computing system”. It goes on to state, “designing and implementing systems that deliberately or inadvertently demean individuals or groups is ethically unacceptable.” The controversial part of this case is the clause that reads, “or inadvertently demean individuals or groups…”(Code of Ethics).

A case where a moral person should not follow this imperative is when designing an anonymous social messaging site. A concrete example of this is the app Yik Yak which is widely used not only here at UVA, but at a number of other schools around the country. According to its founders, the app is designed with the purpose of, “sharing your thoughts with people around you while keeping your privacy” (Dewey). They envision the app to be a hyper-local social messaging app that allows you to see what people around you are up to and how they feel in an anonymous fashion (Dewey). The app is used that way by many here at UVA as well as at other schools, one University of Buffalo student said that the app, “shows us when other people around you are experiencing or feeling the same way that we do, which is pretty cool” (Magid). As a result, it has become very popular on college campuses, but the controversy has arisen.

The app began to gain traction in high schools and middle schools, and there were a number of cases of cyber-bullying being reported. The fact that users are anonymous makes it a prime tool for cyber-bullies. This is where the ethical dilemma arises, despite the fact that the designers did not intend to have their app used in a negative way, it clearly does, “inadvertently demean individuals”, which is against the imperative being examined. It has had such a large negative impact that there is even a petition on change.org that had over 78,000 supporters to shut down the app because of the harm that it was doing to kids (Change.org). In addition to cyber-bullying, there were even bomb threats posted as messages on the app in three states and a student promising a “Virginia Tech Part 2” on his campus(Crook).

Clearly there is a disagreement between the intentions of the designers of the app and the actual ramifications of their actions as described in the code of ethics. Despite not intending to provide as a facilitator for cyber bullying or for more extreme crimes, however, they are being used. In this case, the designers could easily ignore these problems and decide that the overall good/popularity of the app outweighs the negatives.

Works Cited

* Code of Ethics: <http://www.acm.org/about/code-of-ethics>
* Change.org: <https://www.change.org/p/tyler-droll-and-brooks-buffington-shut-down-the-app-yik-yak>
* Caitlin Dewey: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/10/07/how-do-you-solve-a-problem-like-yik-yak/>
* Jordan Crook: <http://techcrunch.com/gallery/a-brief-history-of-yik-yak/slide/10/>
* Larry Magid: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/larry-magid/banning-yik-yak-from-coll_b_6779168.html>
* Topic: Identify one of the imperatives and present a plausible case where a moral and honest person should choose not to follow that imperative
* Imperative 3.5: “Articulate and support policies that protect the dignity of users and others affected by a computing system
  + Specifically, “designing or implementing systems that deliberately or **inadvertently** demean individuals or groups is ethically unacceptable”
  + Designing an anonymous messaging app, ie. Yik Yak, with the purpose of “sharing your thoughts with people around you while keeping your privacy”
  + Hyper-local social messaging app which allows users to see what is happening in the place where they are now
  + Most obvious application is to be used at schools for students to communicate with each other
    - This is how it’s used at UVA, used to keep people up to date with the latest happenings on grounds
    - Also used for jokes, questions, and alerts by students
    - “shows us when other people around you are experiencing or feeling the same way that we do, which is pretty cool” 🡪 University of Buffalo student
      * <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/10/07/how-do-you-solve-a-problem-like-yik-yak/>
  + Yik Yak’s ultimate goal is to have a hyper-local news and community network, ie
  + However, also has the potential to be used in negative ways
    - Has had the problem of cyber-bullying, particularly in high schools and middle schools
    - This is where the ethical dilemma arises, as it is not the intention of the designer to have the app be used to “inadvertently demean individuals”, but this is how it is being used
    - <https://www.change.org/p/tyler-droll-and-brooks-buffington-shut-down-the-app-yik-yak>
    - Even bomb threats: <http://techcrunch.com/gallery/a-brief-history-of-yik-yak/slide/10/>
* Clearly a disagreement with the intentions of an honest and moral person who is designing the app and the actual ramifications of his actions as described in the code, specifically “inadvertently demean individuals or groups is ethically unacceptable”
* In this case, a person could certainly try their best to solve these issues
  + ie. Geofencing, blocking the use of the app in high schools and middle schools as well as other requested college campuses
  + or simply think that this part of the imperative is something that can be ignored as the overall good/popularity of the app is more important than a few rotten apples in the bunch