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CSE 488 – Computer Ethics

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### Facebook Privacy and Missing Computers

The articles we have analyzed for this term paper are regarding two separate computer ethics topics, one concerning the social networking website Facebook changing its user terms without directly notifying its users, and the other about a prominent United States nuclear warhead facility mysteriously losing 80 of its computers within a year. These two ethical cases have brought forth many important questions regarding moral and ethical systems and the issues that arise when considering what led to these situations to occur.

At first, these two issues can appear to be completely distinct from one another, but as we will soon find out, there are similar ethical systems being utilized by these two different parties. The issues of privacy, intellectual property and computer system security are common amongst these two stories. The behaviors that both companies employed, as well as the ethical implications, are clearly not justifiable and are direct violations of the ethical standards set by the ACM and IEEE Code of Ethics. The concerns of both intellectual property and system security are prominent here and can be mutually applied when discussing both of these stories. Regardless of intent, both Facebook and the Los Alamos Nuclear Facility clearly violated the most common moral and ethical systems as well as the ACM and IEEE code of ethics.

In the case of Facebook, the changing of the privacy terms of use without directly

addressing its users is a direct violation of ethical standards. To modify specific and very important terms “under the radar” is evidence of egoism, as it does not benefit the user in any way, but rather satisfies only the interests of the Facebook Corporation and its stakeholders. Despite the reasons why Facebook decided to change the user terms of service, claiming ownership over an individual’s personal information, such as photos, an email address or phone number is never justified or ethical. The fact that Facebook didn’t create a prompt at the login screen to allow users to view the new terms of service, and accept them in order to access their account, proves how dishonest the acts by Facebook actually were. If Facebook can show a prompt upon logging in about the changes in certain functionalities of the website, such as a page layout change or new chat features, then they could have easily implemented a similar prompt regarding the modifications in the user terms of use.

Considering this isn’t the first time Facebook has been discovered exhibiting shady privacy acts, this should come as no surprise to anyone. In 2007, it was determined that Facebook created a tool, referred to as “Beacon,” that broadcasted a Facebook user’s shopping habits and other important information to third party corporations. Subsequently, a 10 million dollar class action lawsuit was filed within a year alleging that Facebook users did not receive adequate notice regarding Beacon’s collection of user information being sold to companies like Blockbuster and Gamefly.

The ethical issue of intellectual property rights and privacy are foremost within this discussion. When Facebook changed the user terms of use (without notifying the users) they altered a specific section that apparently gave them perpetual ownership of a

user's personal information. This alteration is a direct violation of more than a few ethical rights, and especially those outlined in the ACM. As part of the ACM's General Moral Imperatives, Facebook breached a few codes. Imperative 1.3 states that one should be honest and trustworthy, in which Facebook actively not telling its users of the service agreement change clearly violates. Furthermore, Facebook decided to not honor the property rights of individuals, respect the privacy of its users, nor honor the confidentiality of user information (Imperatives 1.5, 1.7 and 1.8 respectively).

With the outline of these violations clearly stated, it is obvious that the behavior of Facebook is not consistent with the ACM or the most universal ethical standards. When Facebook users access an account to utilize its many features, they do not want to worry about is what is being done with their personal information. Some users of Facebook only hold onto an account temporarily, for a specific purpose such as reaching out to family, and shouldn't be concerned about what happens to personal photos after they terminate their account. These are the practical issues associated with the "under the radar" altering of Facebook's terms of use policy, and its users should not be concerned with their privacy while on the world's largest social networking website.

In the case of the missing computers from the Los Alamos National Laboratory, it is somewhat a more ethically ambiguous case. Created as a secret testing and research facility during the Second World War, the Los Alamos nuclear facility worked in alliance with other laboratories and universities to produce the world's first atomic bombs. Since 1943, the facility has been a major research center with relations to national security, nanotechnology, supercomputing, and astrophysics.

In 2009, 67 Los Alamos laboratory computers went missing from the facility, and employees were unsure on whether they were lost or stolen. Also, 3 other computers were stolen from an employee's home. All in all, 80 computers were deemed "missing" within a year. The severity of the missing computers was never addressed since the issue was considered a property management concern and not as a valid cyber security threat. Consequently, the risk or threat resulting from the missing computers is unclear, as the follow-up on the potential data losses hasn't been tracked by those responsible.

Despite the ambiguity of this case, we can still affirm that those responsible did not exercise proper ethical standards in both preventing and handling the losses of the laboratory computers. When considering how quickly they passed off the issue as "non cyber-security related" shows they didn't consider the potential threat of the situation, a justification by either egoism or situational ethics. The facility openly addressed the fact of the thefts, yet did not properly pursue the gravity of what exactly was obtained through the data breach. With cyber attacks and malicious hacking becoming more prominent in recent years, those responsible should have taken more appropriate measures to both prevent and follow up on the thefts.

The behavior of those responsible for the thefts undoubtedly violated ethical standards as well as rules within the ACM code of ethics. Imperative 2.8, which states that theft or destruction of tangible property is prohibited, and elaborates upon restricting access to particular systems based on user permissions. The Los Alamos facility did not employ the proper preventative measures to ensure optimal system security, and as a result, various types of important and classified data are now potentially compromised.

The behavior of those responsible addresses the issue of computer security and just how important it is to properly protect vital computer data.

Perhaps there are many who oppose my views, believing that Facebook was justified in implementing new terms of service and Los Alamos did everything they could to both prevent and follow up on the missing computers. One could argue my point against Facebook, claiming they didn't have malicious intentions when changing the user terms. But this argument fails. It cannot justify why Facebook chooses to prompt users about the most minimal layout and functional changes (such as the addition of video chat or the new Timeline feature) yet does not when implementing such a critical change in its user terms of service. Therefore, my argument holds strong, as the backlash from this issue ultimately resulted in Facebook reverting back to its previous terms of service.

The actions demonstrated by both Facebook and the Los Alamos National Laboratory exhibit unjustifiable actions that affect a website user's privacy rights and intellectual property, and the cyber security that could potentially threaten United State's national security. Multi-Billion dollar corporations like Facebook cannot selectively pick and choose the policies they wish to publish and which ones to keep under the radar, especially when it affects a user's intellectual property and their right to privacy. Alternatively, governmental institutions need to be held accountable for their actions, both preventative and corrective, considering what could happen should stolen data be put into the wrong hands. The issues of intellectual property management, privacy, and cyber security are vital in the world of computing, and we must not only keep the standards in place, but improve them as technology moves forward.

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