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CSE488 – Computer Ethics

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Facebook, Los Alamos Nuclear Facility Intellectual Theft

Moral standards in today's technological world will remain a constant evolving machine. New technologies are emerging every day. With these new technologies comes a new set of moral standards that need to be analyzed and implemented. In this paper I will discuss two articles that, at first glance, seem very different. A Los Alamos based nuclear facility "losing" 80 computers, and Facebook subtly changing privacy rights to claim your intellectual property. These two situations are very different, but bring forth the same ethical questions of our privacy, and security.

The issues of privacy, security, and intellectual property are common today because it seems our entire lives are being stored somewhere on a public database. Keep in mind that these issues are caused because we choose to store and share our lives on public servers. However, it does not justify intellectual theft, and clear violations of our privacy. Both the Los Alamos based nuclear facility and Facebook exhibit clear violations of the ACM and IEEE code of ethics. Whatever the intent of these entities, it clearly needs to be re-analyzed and changed to ensure its morality remains intact.

The first article spoke of 80 computers that went missing from a Los Alamos National Laboratory in the state of New Mexico. The facility was originally a secret facility built during World War II and was the site of the *Manhattan Project* which gave birth to the first nuclear bombs. Since its inception, the facility has been a major research center dealing with nanotechnology, supercomputing, and renewable energies.

This is an especially alarming case of theft because these computers may house information on the most devastating weapons this world has ever seen. These weapons have the capacity to end the world. With this capacity it should be expected that the security of the facility would be a top priority. However, with 13 lab computers either lost or stolen, and another 67 that have been deemed “missing”, it’s quite clear that security and inventory are not managed well enough. These “cyber security issues” were not engaged in a timely manner because they were considered a “property management issue”. Consequently, the threats of losing such information have the potential to result in disaster. To make matters worse, it’s not even clear if the on these “lost” computers is even being pursued! This clearly looks like a theft of the facilities intellectual property.

The situation of losing data is clearly a violation of ethical standards. The fact that they consider the loss of data as a “property management issue” is alarming, and shows their indifference to the loss of potentially harmful information. With the importance of their data and the increase of data hacking, and cyber-attacks, the Los Alamos facility should have taken more appropriate actions to ensure the security of their intellectual and physical property.

Those responsible for the thefts violated Imperative 2.8 which says “theft or destruction of tangible property” is prohibited. It also talks about the restriction of access to certain systems based on the permissions granted to a person. The Los Alamos facility did not take the steps necessary to ensure their systems were safe. As a result, classified information may have been potentially leaked to the wrong types of people.

The individuals who stole the information may likely have stolen it for personal gain. This case of *Egoism* is beyond selfish because the individual’s actions can have ramifications that will lead to the decimation of an entire town. The security of the information housed at this

nuclear facility needs to be the main concern of upper management, as well as middle management. Regular inventory should also be kept to ensure the safety of the property.

The second article dealt with subtle privacy changes implemented by social media giant Facebook without properly informing its users. These privacy changes which basically say “We can do anything with the content you post on Facebook,. Forever” is clearly a violation of ethical standards. Modifying an important document that has to do with privacy for its own interest is a clear example of *Egoism*. Facebook controls the content of some 500 million users! To have access to the content of those 500 million users would certainly benefit anyone, however without compensation for the use of that content, the Facebook user is left with nothing but a privacy violation. The reasoning for Facebook’s claim to ownership over our personal information, and pictures can however be justified by the fact that it is our choice to post our information on servers owned by Facebook. However, the sneaky tactics Facebook used to gain ownership over our intellectual property is the epitome of unethical. Facebook simply needed to provide the information to the users, however chose not because they knew the public outcry would become a media disaster.

This is by no means the first time Facebook has been caught violating privacy acts without the user permission. In 2007 Facebook was discovered using a tracking tool known as “Beacon”. Beacon broadcasted information about a user’s shopping habits to other websites. Again, Facebook does not feel the need to provide notice of how it will use information collected from the user. Facebook seems to feel as though its service is consolation for the violation of privacy rights. As a result of *Beacon*, Facebook suffered a 10 million dollar class action suit for not informing the public of their tracking methods, and distribution of the information they supplied to third parties.

This issue of intellectual property is clearly the issue Facebook is violating. Changing their terms of use, without informing the users, to gain rights over the intellectual property of its users is as unethical as it gets. It's a violation of ethics outlined by the ACM. Imperative 1.3 says "one should be honest and trustworthy". Facebook is clearly not honest or trustworthy with their "sneaky" tactics. Facebook also exhibits a certain disrespect for the rights of the individuals using their service. These violations are not consistent with the ACM's code of conduct nor are they consistent with the moral standards innate to all human beings. Facebook knew better after the debacle concerning *Beacon*, yet chose to take an action concerning the privacy of its users without informing them. Imperatives 1.5-1.8 all deal with the property rights of individuals, respect of the privacy of users, and confidentiality of the users. Facebook clearly violated each of those imperatives.

I will admit that I believe if Facebook has chosen to inform its users about these privacy changes, they do have a certain claim to the information, and pictures of the users. If the user does not agree to these terms, they have the option of not accepting them and leaving Facebook indefinitely. It was first thought that the claim over a user's intellectual property was common among social media websites, however after comparisons were made it showed that companies such as MySpace, YouTube, and Twitter made no claims to the content of a user. My important is what happens to your data after you delete an account. Facebook may store that data indefinitely for future use. Something you may have deleted years ago will never really be deleted. A Facebook message sent to another user is a perfect example of this. If a user sends a message to another user on Facebook and then deletes their account, that message will still remain in the mailbox of the user who received the message. MySpace clearly states that once an account is deleted, it will cease all distribution of your content and remove it as soon as possible.

YouTube also states that “all content will be removed and terminated a reasonable time after you remove your account. After examining other social media websites its clear Facebook’s lease on your online life with them is not the norm.

Facebook does clearly state in their policy “We reserve the right, at our sole discretion, to change or delete portions of these terms at any time without further notice”. They also state “Your continued use of the Facebook service after any such changes constitutes your acceptance of the new terms”. That line is especially funny to me because it assumes we will continually read Facebook’s policies assuming changes in them are a regular practice. These two lines in their policies are clearly there to help protect them from sneaky tactics taken. It’s also clear Facebook knew that its tactics were wrong when they reverted back to their original terms of use. Ultimately though, with this knowledge, our continued use of Facebook only helps support the company who is directly lying to our faces. We can sit, ignorant of our privacy violations, and continue to use Facebook, or we can take a real stand and boycott their services to help keep Facebook honest. Will that ever happen? Since 2009 Facebook has grown from 140 million user to well over 500 million. Boycott Facebook? Not likely.

In conclusion the violation of intellectual property by both Facebook and the Los Alamos nuclear facility are in direct conflict with the ACM and IEEE code of ethics. The irresponsibility of the Los Alamos nuclear facility directly threatens the welfare of the United States. Social media giants like Facebook cannot selectively choose which policy changes it will inform the public about. It is the ethical responsibility of both Facebook and the Los Alamos nuclear facility to maintain the security of its intellectual property. Mismanagement of their intellectual property should be met with harsh consequences. Issues of intellectual property management will

continue as technology continues to move forward, however our ethical responsibility to protect that intellectual property will always remain.

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