CASE: MICHAEL'S ESSAY

Professor Hernandez teaches persuasive writing at a university. Every year she requires students to write an essay defending something they actually oppose. The purpose of the exercise is to help students see that arguments that sound good aren't necessarily the same as the arguments that are logical, and also to give students experience in playing the devil's advocate.

Michael is a student in Professor Hernandez's class. In his essay, "In Defense of Terrorism: Terrorism as the Only Path from Oppression to Democracy," Michael argued that all modern democratic states were founded by terrorists. He described parallels between George Washington and Osama bin Laden. He finished the paper by advocating strongly that the United States ought to provide financial and logistical support to terrorist groups active in nondemocratic countries as a method of spreading democracy.

Professor Hernandez receives assignments in electrical form. She grades papers by typing comments into the file before assigning the final grade. While grading some class work, she discovered several papers by Michaels's classmates that appeared to be plagiarized. After she finished grading, she uploaded the papers to Plagiarism Preventer, a popular Web site that checks papers for plagiarism. It also permanently stores student papers submitted to the service so that they can be used in future plagiarism checks of other papers.

Professor Bobson, who also teaches at a different college, also uses Plagiarism Preventer to detect and prevent plagiarism. One of the student papers he submitted matched Michael's paper significantly because they quoted many of the same sources. Because of the high degree of similarity, Plagiarism Preventer provided Professor Bobson with the full text of Michael's paper. This included Professor Hernandez's comments, Michael's full name and Michael's grade, which was an A+. Professor Hernandez's comments were all

very positive: "Nice argument," "Good points," "A useful interpretation of George Washington's role in the revolution."

Unlike Professor Hernandez, Professor Bobson was appalled at the content of the paper. He immediately reposted the full text of the paper(including Michael's name and grade, and Professor Hernandez's comments) on his blog under the title "Terrorist Supporters Set Up Shop at Major University," and included Professor Hernandez's name and the name of her university. The post generated a lot of attention on blogs and social media sites and cable news channels. Both Michael and Professor Hernandez started to receive angry and threatening phone calls and e-mails including death threats. Meanwhile, the university received thousands of complaints from concerned alumni and parents.

Reflection Questions

1. **APPLICATION**: Michael's paper became public through a series of actions performed by other people:
   - Professor Hernandez uploaded his paper to Plagiarism Preventer without his knowledge.
   - Plagiarism Preventer allowed Professor Bobson to download the paper.
   - Professor Bobson posted the paper on the Internet.
   - Various blogs and social media sites drew attention to the paper.
   - Traditional media outlets publicized the controversy widely on TV and in newspapers.
   - Upset people called Michael at home to harass and threaten him.

   Which of the actions in this series violated Michael's privacy? Some of the actions may have violated rights other than privacy, but in this question you should focus on privacy violations only. You may want to explicitly state the definition of privacy you are applying to this case.

2. **POSITION**: Which actions listed in question 1 were unethical but did not violate Michael's privacy? Explain your answer, again making reference to which definition of privacy you think applies.
3. **CONTEXT**: Which of your answers to the previous two questions would change if Michael's grade had not been included in the paper? What if Michael's name had not been included in the paper? Explain your answers.
4. **APPLICATION**: Is it unethical for college professors to use Plagiarism Preventer without student consent? Justify your answer, using one of the ethical theories from Chapter 1
5. **APPLICATION**: Is it unethical for Plagiarism Preventer to give the full text of student works to third parties? Justify your answer, using one of the ethical theories from Chapter 1.