

Spek

Ethical Risk Zones

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"Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral."

- Melvin Kranzberg's First Law of Technology

Stories of ethical missteps in technology dominate the news. For all of the good technology can do, it also raises issues of privacy, disinformation, bias, fairness, and safety. Without attention to the ethical aspects of our products, our intended benefits may be overshadowed by unintended harms.

This presentation documents the results of an ethical review of Spek. In the following slides, we highlight relevant ethical “risk zones” and identify strategies for mitigating those risks.

We hope that this review will be the beginning of an ongoing ethics conversation.

Surveillance

How will we protect privacy?

Can our product be used to track users?

Could it be used to target specific groups?

How do we balance a great user experience with protecting privacy?

- Since our app uses the user's location to discover nearby hotels, our product can track our users if they decide to opt in.
- The app could potentially be used to target specific groups through user check-ins and posts. The history of a user's check-ins could be used against them if their employer were to check it, for instance.
- We are able to balance a great user experience with protecting privacy by only using location tracking to locate hotels and by disabling tracking when the app is not in use. The Spek app allows users to do so through the "Ghost Mode" feature, where users are able to stay anonymous and turn their location off from others to view. Additionally, we can prioritize the encryption of user data on the backend so that our users' information is protected.

Disinformation

How will we promote truth?

Does our tech have the ability to influence people's worldviews?

What could become the equivalent of false news, bots, or deepfakes on our platform?

- As any other social media platform, users have the ability to express their own opinions and thoughts in multiple forms [ex: hotel reviews, comments, etc.] which can result in the rapid spread of misinformation and the possible accumulation of false profiles/bots.
- The ability to share news articles may also prove risky when users utilize un-reliable news sources or opinion articles that are not backed up by facts or science.
- If risks are left unchecked, instances of misinformation may negatively impact hotel businesses and interactions between users.

Addiction

How will we promote healthier behaviors?

Is our business model based on engagement?

What might extreme use or unhealthy engagement look like with our tech?

- Our app's business model is based on engagement. Since this is a free app, we want our users to stay engaged and want to come back to our application.
- An example of extreme user engagement could be constantly checking their own reviews to see if anyone has liked or commented on them. Since this application is very similar to other social media apps, there is the possibility of unhealthy engagement such as comparing number of connections with other users.

Data Control

*How will we enable
transparency?*

Do we *need* to collect the data
we collect from users?

Do users have the option to
choose what data they share?

How do we ensure the safety
of data we store?

- In order for the Spek app to be engaging and foster a good user experience, collecting data will help make the user experience more customizable for a specific user such as certain hotels or people they should connect with.
- Data that the Spek app needs to collect is basic user information such as their name, email, and their business association in order to guarantee and authorize a Spek account for them.
- The data we will be collecting from user's is their current location as well as the hotels they stay at and where they have traveled.
- The app will also be collecting data on when user enter a new hotel and will allow the user to share where they have checked in on the Spek application
- In order for the Spek app to provide accurate hotel data, the location of users needs to be shared with the app so that the user can retrieve local hotels and possible hotels for their future travels
- In addition, a main part of providing a community within the application is for users to be able to share the hotels they have stayed and where they recently check in
 - If users do not feel comfortable with sharing their location and the hotel they checked in, they can turn on the private/ghost mode feature which disable location sharing with their connections

Bad Actors

How will we promote civility?

Can our product be used to spam, harass, target, or exploit others?

What crimes could arise around our tech?

How can we help our users feel safe using our product?

- Since there are social media aspects of the Spek app, being that there is a feed where people can post and comment on other people's reviews, articles, and posts, there is plenty of room for the potential of malicious users. With the freedom of commenting on any post that a user comes across, the potential for spam, harassment, and exploitation is probable.
- Hateful or negative comments, as well as review bombing hotels are the main concerns when it comes to evaluating the potential harm that bad actors can have. If not properly moderated, it can cause not only a negative impact on the user's perspective of the Spek app as a whole, but cause tension in the relationships between Spek and other hotels.
- To counteract this, we have implemented the option for users to report posts and comments that they deem inappropriate. Moderation teams will then evaluate and make decisions based on the reports they receive. In the future, we may possibly implement a filter system where Spek can ban certain words from being posted, as well as a filtration system for users to ban words they do not want to see on their feed.

Outsized Power

How will we promote choice?

Do our growth targets result in us compromising our values or harming customers, suppliers, or employees?

How can we ensure our tech isn't misused if we're acquired?

- As we've seen from other review based social media apps, the potential for hotels or other businesses to provide monetary compensation to remove reviews that can "harm" their business, violates the transparency of ethical business practices.
- This pitfall is a serious topic that is taken into consideration by both our team, and our sponsors, and is an ongoing conversation on how to handle a delicate situation.

Credits

This template is based on the Ethical Explorer Pack created by the Omidyar Network. Find out more and get the Ethical Explore Field Guide and Tech Risk Zone cards at ethicalexplorer.org