

Is Sophie Zhang’s whistle-blowing morally required?

Roberto Meroni
email: roberto.meroni@estudiantat.upc.edu

11 November 2023

1 Introduction

Whistle-blowing represents an ethical dilemma between conflicting moral requirements: on one side, the loyalty, the professionalism, the observance of the deontological code (professional ethics); on the other side, integrity, fairness, justice (human ethics). In the specific case of Sophie Zhang, it’s necessary to evaluate whether the moral requirements in favor of the whistle-blowing overcome the ones against it.

2 Moral requirements for whistle-blowing

2.1 The Company Causes Serious Harm to the Public

Big tech companies like Facebook are increasingly being deeply routed in our society. Even though they are private companies and not governments authorities, the role they play in the society is becoming too impactful to not have any responsibility. The lack of security measures toward fake identities and political manipulations leads to a large number of attempts of government abuses [2, 3, 4, 5, 6]. Even if the boundaries of what Facebook should and should not be responsible of are not completely clear, the problem of misleading of citizens and election interference is extremely harmful, as the decisions taken by a political leader have a huge impact on the life of every citizen (and even on citizens of other countries).

2.2 Reporting to Superiors, Exhausting Other Internal Procedures and Concluding Inaction

Trying to resolve the problem internally is a required step for a morally required whistle-blow, as this would satisfy the human ethics without having to break the deontological code. According to the sources [6], Zhang has tried several times to address the issue with internal procedures, with no success. Even if

most of her attempts are only self-declared, "The Guardian" stated that her statements are reliable, based on internal documents they have access to, and also her version seems coherent with the rest of the story.

2.3 Evidence Convincing to a Reasonable, Impartial Observer

As Zhang worked as a data scientist for the Facebook Site Integrity fake engagement team, she had access to internal practices of the company and can provide evidence [1]. Also, the ineffectiveness of Facebook measures can be checked by everyone as the manipulation attempts are evident and done on a public social network.

2.4 Good Reason to Believe Disclosure Will Prevent or Decrease Harm

Unveiling the Facebook's failure to combat political manipulation campaigns has two main benefits:

- It exposes government abuses, allowing citizens to know whether their past decisions were misled or not, and make them reason on their future decisions
- It puts external pressure (added to the internal pressure) on the company to take the necessary measures for not making this happen again

3 Moral Analysis of Sophie Zhang's actions

3.1 Utilitarianism

The harm caused to the large number of people involved widely overrides the benefits (Facebook's stability and earnings of shareholders, personal gain of political leaders) of not disclosing the sensitive information, so the whistle-blow is morally accepted.

3.2 Kantian Theory

Kant's categorical imperative suggests that an action is morally permissible if its principle could be applied universally. In the case of whistle-blowing, if everyone were to expose instances of wrongdoing, this might contribute to a more transparent and accountable society. From a Kantian perspective, since Zhang's whistle-blowing is motivated by a sense of duty to uphold moral principles and expose injustices, it is morally acceptable.

3.3 Virtue Ethics

Different virtues are in conflict here. Even though her actions embody virtuous character traits such as honesty, integrity, and courage, whistle-blowing goes against virtues such as responsibility, loyalty and professionalism.

4 Conclusion

Facebook, at least for issues of such size and impact, has to be responsible for what happens on its platform. The company inaction, or not-sufficient action, was causing serious harm to the public. Attempts of Sophie Zhang to solve the problem internally got ignored, and the blatant informations in her possess, if revealed, could prevent a large amount of human suffering. Following the Ethical Theories, her conduct is consistent with Utilitarianism and Kantian Theory. Despite conflicting virtues, the benefits of whistle-blowing largely outweigh the moral constraints set by the professional ethics, therefore her whistle-blow is at least morally acceptable, if not morally required.

References

- [1] Another facebook whistleblower says she is willing to testify before congress. CNN, 2021.
- [2] Facebook ignored blatant political manipulation around the world, claims former data scientist. the Verge, 2021.
- [3] Facebook isn't interested in countries like ours': Azerbaijan troll network returns months after ban. the Guardian, 2021.
- [4] Facebook knew of honduran president's manipulation campaign – and let it continue for 11 months. the Guardian, 2021.
- [5] Facebook planned to remove fake accounts in india – until it realized a bjp politician was involved. the Guardian, 2021.
- [6] How facebook let fake engagement distort global politics: a whistleblower's account. the Guardian, 2021.