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On the Ethos of File Sharing

Since the beginning of the internet, file sharing has become an ever increasing issue to deal with in the electronic world. People casually share music, software, and other electronic media freely online with little thought to whether it is the right thing to do or not. From a professional standpoint, it is quickly identified as a moral wrong. It is wrong from a casual standpoint because of the harm it causes. Whoever created the file loses recognition for their hard work. This loss of recognition can come with many other negative consequences as well. One of these side effects is monetary loss, which can cause financial duress on the person. This lack of compensation is not limited to monetary, but intellectually as well. In the way taking someone else’s code and not giving them credit is plagiarism, this same concept can be applied to illegal file sharing. File sharing is not something that is permissible under the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) code of ethics, and it is in violation of several components of the Institute for Electric and Electronic Engineers (IEEE) code of ethics as well.

The first violations come from the ACM code of ethics is section 1.2. This section of the code of ethics lays out that it is priority to prevent harm to others ("IEEE, IEEE Code of Ethics"). This harm includes actions that can lead to the loss of property, including intellectual. When engaging in file sharing, the person who is sharing the files, is indirectly causing harm to someone’s property. This harm to an intellectual property is not extensively covered in this section, but it still falls under here because it is a harm to another’s property. Subsequent sections go into more detail on why it is not a permissible activity.

Section 1.5 of the ACM code of ethics deals with property rights such as copyrights and patents ("IEEE, IEEE Code of Ethics"). When file sharing is committed, it directly violates this section. The section describes disregard for copyrights and patents as, “…contrary to professional behavior ("IEEE, IEEE Code of Ethics")”. Copyrights exist in order to protect someone’s collective effort over time to produce something. It also gives credit and monetary compensation to the appropriate developer of the copyrighted item.

Another section of the ACM code of ethics, 2.3, highlights the need for professionals to, “Know and respect existing laws pertaining to professional work ("IEEE, IEEE Code of Ethics").” Examples of laws pertaining to professional work are copyright laws and laws dealing with intellectual property. Illegal file sharing shows a blatant disrespect for these laws, and these laws are common knowledge in Country’s that have them. Most software that is shared also include legal documentation that a user must accept before utilizing it. Media usually will also have warnings about the consequences of illegally sharing it. These notices to the user only constitute a small portion of efforts to prevent illegal file sharing and help to deter ignorance as an acceptable excuse for doing it.

All of the violations of the ACM code of ethics break all the sections of part 4. The two sections here basically say that members must uphold the code of ethics and that breaking any part of this code is not consistent with membership in ACM ("IEEE, IEEE Code of Ethics"). In order for a document such as the ACM code of ethics to exist, it is vital that all members uphold the standards outlined in it. Since ethics is a very grey area, this document becomes an excellent guide on how to behave in regards to the computing world. Illegal file sharing is not consistent with the guidelines and moral principles that the ACM have put together and because of this, it is not consistent with membership in ACM.

Looking at the IEEE code of ethics, it is quick to see that file sharing is a direct violation of parts 2 and parts 9. Section 2 is only partially relevant to file sharing in that it deals with avoiding conflicts of interest ("Association for Computing Machinery"). A conflict of interest does happen when illegal file sharing occurs, however it may be impossible to notify parties that are affected. This conflict exist from the creator / owner of the file and the person engaged in the illegal sharing of that file. Section 9 outlines that members should avoid causing harm to others, their property, and their reputation ("Association for Computing Machinery"). Section 9 is violated by illegal file sharing in a couple ways. File sharing cause’s injury to someone’s intellectual property, which comes in many forms such as monetary loss, lack of recognition, and the possibility of a degraded product being used by others.

In conclusion, the above examples only outline why illegal file sharing is not an ethically acceptable behavior in the professional workplace given the code of ethics from either institute. These violations are not something that is consistent with a professional computer user and these documents are some of the only guidelines that what is morally permissible and what is not morally permissible. Kantian ethics most closely parallel these documents with Kant’s categorical imperatives, since the thought of everyone stealing work from others is not very appealing. Utilitarian ethics is a horrible approach to most ethical problems since there is no objective way to measure suffering. At the end of the day, this leaves these 2 documents to help guide professional computer people in their interactions with technology, people, electronics, computers, and computer systems.

Works Cited

1. "IEEE, IEEE Code of Ethics." IEEE. Web. 16 Sept. 2015
2. "Association for Computing Machinery." Code of Ethics —. Web. 16 Sept. 2015.