Computing Ethics Lab

CS 102

Sept. 29, 2006

Introduction

This lab will help us discover:

1. The beginnings of a discussion of ethics and computing.

Lab

Be prepared to explain your reasoning:

1. Suppose you are the director of an Internet Service Provider (for example, AOL) that serves the e-mail needs of 10,000 customers. You receive dozens of complaints from them every week about the volume of spam they are receiving. Meanwhile, American spammers are hacking into computers in Jamborea (an East Asian country) and using them to mail spam back to the United States. You estimate that at least 99% of email originating from Jamborea is spam. A few of the messages, however, are probably legitimate emails. Should you do anything to restrict the flow of messages from Jamborea to your customers?

2. Any original piece of intellectual property you have created, such as a poem, term paper, or photograph, is automatically copyrighted, even if you did not label it with a copyright notice. Think about your most valuable piece of copyrighted material. Describe the ownership rights you would like to claim on it.

3. Which is more likely to be effective in protecting intellectual property in digital media such as CDs and DVDs: tougher copyright laws or new technologies incorporating more sophisticated anti-copying measures?

4. You are applying for an account at a video rental store. The clerk asks you to fill out the application form completely. One of the fields asks for your Social Security number. You leave that field blank. The clerk refuses to accept your application with the field filled in. You ask to speak to the manager and the clerk replies that the manager is unavailable. Would it be wrong in this situation to fill in a fake Social Security number?

5. In a recent study, people in subway stations were offered a cheap pen in return for disclosing their passwords. About 90% offered their passwords in return for the pen. Do people really value privacy?

6. Oberlin College requires that every computer brought to campus by a student be inspected for viruses. System administrators remove all of the viruses from the students' computers. Students whose computers subsequently pick up and spread a virus may be fined $25, whether they knew about the virus or not. Is this an ethically justifiable policy?

7. While waiting for an appointment with your physician, you see a brochure advertising a new surgical procedure that implants a tiny computer chip inside your skull just behind your left ear. The purpose of the chip is to help you associate names with faces. The procedure for inserting the chip is so simple that your physician is performing it in her office. Suppose your career is in sales, where such a device could help you earn high commissions. What questions would you want to have answered before you agreed to have such a device inserted into your skull?

8. At work you manage a team of five employees. Your boss tells you that because of a company-wide layoff, you will need to lay off one of your team members. Two of your employees are substantially less productive than the other three, but you aren't sure which of these two to lay off. You know that the company keeps track of all Internet traffic to each person's computer, although you have never shared this information with your team. You could use this information to determine how much time, if any, these two employees are spending surfing the Web. Is it wrong to access these traffic records?

The preceding discussion questions were taken from M. J. Quinn, *Ethics for the Information Age*, Addison Wesley, 2005.