

Computing Ethics Lab

CS 102

Sept. 29, 2003

Name(s)

Introduction

This lab will help us discover:

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

Lab

The following ethics case studies were taken from the Ethics Update Home Page at <http://ethics.sandiego.edu/>.

Computer Privacy

An interesting post on a computer discussion site (Slashdot) raises some important questions about software installed by cable personnel. Here's the entry in its entirety:

Posted by Cliff on Monday October 28, @08:33AM from the fishy-practices dept. NOS asks: "The cable guy came over to install a cable modem at my Dad's house. As I watched him do his stuff I noticed he was installing something called Broadjump Client Foundation. I know you don't need software for a cable modem to work so I asked if it was necessary. He said he had to do his list of things, and we had to sign that he did his list of things, otherwise he couldn't leave it with us to use. Since I can always remove the software, I agreed, but I noticed while he was flipping through the install, he was clicking 'agree' on every EULA that came up. Doing a search on Google for 'Broadjump Client Foundation' comes up with some pretty scary stuff as far as what it does, like: 'Builds a database of subscriber demographics and buying behaviors to help evolve and refine marketing efforts.' Now, how does this affect us? Neither myself or anyone in my family agreed to the software; the cable guy did. And is there anyway to get cable companies to stop doing this as I can imagine since the cable company is a monopoly in this town, that the percentage of people who still have this software on their computers is pretty high."

The author raises some important issues here. One of them is the general issue of the extent to which Internet providers can report on the Web activities of their subscribers. Another, related issue is the way in which permissions are handled (or not handled) in this case, and obviously the way in which it affects the first issue. A related issue occurs when users unknowingly download

software that then monitors their web browser activity. Think about this issue on two levels. First, what do you think is right or wrong (permissible or impermissible) in this scenario? Was it wrong, for example, for the computer technician to click off on the EULAs? Second, to what extent should these things be regulated? That is, should there be legislation or government regulation overseeing the monitoring behavior of Internet providers? If so, what provisions should it contain?

Notes: The original entry and subsequent discussion can be found at:

<http://ask.slashdot.org/askslashdot/02/10/26/2311244.shtml?tid=172> . This is reprinted with the kind permission of the author.

Not on Our Network, you can't...

At many college and universities in the United States, Internet connections began to slow perceptibly in 2002 as more and more students were downloading music and movies, often files that were pirated or that they were otherwise unauthorized to download. In some cases, as much as seventy-five percent of a university's bandwidth is being taken up with file swapping.

Two distinct issues became intertwined: the size and frequency of the downloads was sufficient to clog college and university networks, often interfering directly with the academic concerns that are primary to the mission of the educational institutions. In addition, students were often downloading files that they were not permitted to download — and were making use of the university's Internet connection to do so.

Administrators have reacted in various ways to this worsening situation. Some have added more bandwidth, often just to see it gobbled up as well. Others have been alerted by companies who felt their rights had been violated. For example, Warner Brothers contacted one college to inform them that one of their students had illegally downloaded a copy of a new Clint Eastwood movie. The Naval Academy, which has a strict honor code that prohibits stealing as well as cheating, confiscated nearly one hundred computers with unauthorized downloaded material on them. Cornell disciplined over fifty students for unauthorized downloading. Other institutions have treated the issue purely as a technical one and explored technical solutions such as limiting the amount of bandwidth a particular student could use at any one time, segregating dorms on the network from academic offices, giving lower priority to the types of files typically found on file-sharing sites, etc.

Imagine that this has become a serious problem at your college or university, and that you are the head of a committee appointed to develop a policy on this issue. What recommendations would you make? What principles would underlie your recommendations? To what extent is this an issue of academic integrity and ethics? What rights do students have to privacy when they are on a university network? What responsibilities do universities have when students are using the university's resources to accomplish something illegal?

Notes: Source: Rebecca Trounson , "Pirated Files Clog College Networks," Los Angeles Times, December 2, 2002, pg. 1. Amy Harmon, "Students Learning to Evade Moves to Protect Media Files," The New York Times, November 27, 2002, Section C.