



## 2022 ETHICS TEAM EVENT

### ETHICS AND SOCIAL MEDIA: WHERE IS THE LINE?

Snapchat is one of the most popular social media apps, especially among teens. What sets Snapchat apart is that the messages – text or image – disappear after a set time limit.

The Snapchat app is quite popular with around 300 million daily users. However, it has received some negative attention. Many people are concerned that there is no record of postings since messages disappear. This makes it hard to prove that messages were even sent. Also, when messages disappear, they seem less serious and permanent. Students often say hurtful things without thinking since there don't appear to be any consequences.

Social media allows people to hide behind a screen. They say things they normally would not say to someone's face. When the message disappears, people take even less care with their words. These messages are hard to monitor.

Some people blame Snapchat itself. The app makes it easier to bully others. It makes it harder to catch bullies in the act. Snapchat has a policy against this behavior, and users can report bullying. The company can remove accounts when bullying occurs. However, students still face bullying on the app. How much ethical responsibility does a social media platform have when it comes to the way its users behave?



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### CASE STUDY

Layla works for Snapchat. She handles customer questions and issues. Sometimes, she deals with accounts that have been reported. These users might have been harassed or bullied.

One day, Layla receives an email from a woman named Stacy. Stacy's son Jay has been the victim of bullying on Snapchat. Stacy tells Layla the names of Jay's classmates who have bullied him. She says that these students use the app to post embarrassing photos of Jay. They send the photos around with hurtful captions.

Jay is often told about the photos or sees them on other students' phones. He does not receive the photos himself, so he can't take screenshots. Jay cannot prove that the harassment is occurring. The messages disappear too quickly. He has gone to the principal, but the bullies deny it.

Stacy asks Layla to help her find proof. "I know the images are deleted, but the bullying is taking place on your app," Stacy writes. "Can you help me prove that my son is being bullied? Do you have files that show all of the horrible things that are being said about my son?"

Layla knows that she cannot give Stacy any files. However, Stacy told her the bullies' names. She could suspend their accounts. Layla feels that her company should be held responsible for enabling bullies. However, this would go against Snapchat's rules. Does Layla have a responsibility to stop the bullying? Or should she stick to the company's rules?

### GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- What ethical issues is Layla facing?
- What would you do?
- Are disappearing messages ethical? Should they exist at all?
- Should companies monitor their users?
- How could companies like Snapchat prevent bullying?

**Please follow the event guidelines to prepare your response.**



## 2021 ETHICS TEAM EVENT ETH

### BUSINESS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

*Should businesses be held responsible for implementing practices to protect the environment? Discuss both the positive and negative implications of holding businesses responsible for implementing practices to protect the environment.*

Since the time of the Industrial Revolution, businesses have been impacting the natural environment on a massive scale. However, it was not until the 1960s, when ecologist Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, highlighting the widespread effects of pollution, was published that social support for environmental protection started gaining momentum.

In the 1980s and 1990s, as major environmental catastrophes such as oil spills increased pressure on businesses, corporations moved from passive regulatory compliance to strategic environmentalism, a more proactive approach to addressing environmental issues. Then, in the early 2000s, scientific research findings ignited even more global concern for the challenges of pollution, emissions, and climate change. Environmentalism commanded universal attention as resource stewardship, a resource management approach in which people and businesses serve as nature's caretakers, was presented as a moral duty.

The 2010s onward reveal an expanded focus on sustainability, clean and green energy, and the integration of environmentally friendly policies into corporate management practices. Now, as climate change—worsened by human activity—intensifies deforestation, loss of biodiversity, soil degradation, melting ice caps, overfishing, and more, businesses are increasingly expected to implement practices that lessen their impact on the environment.

Today, businesses must comply with numerous environmental regulations issued by local-, state- and federal-level governmental agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Agriculture, and Department of Energy. If a business breaches mandatory requirement set by any of these agencies, it is likely to face serious penalties and fines. In 2017, for example, when Volkswagen pleaded guilty in U.S. court to tampering with its vehicles' emissions software, the company was ordered to pay a \$2.8+ billion fine. The company also faced multiple class-action suits, penalties, and—in the case of a handful of its executives—federal prison time.

Beyond the guidelines issued by these different agencies, most businesses are left to determine how, or even whether, to curb their negative environmental impact. To what degree are businesses responsible for implementing practices to protect the environment?



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It is not a decision that companies necessarily make solely for the benefit of the environment—or for themselves. Businesses today are expected to be socially responsible and are held accountable to not only themselves, but also their employees, customers, stakeholders, and the public. Modern customers expect businesses to take a stand on ethical issues, including those related to protecting the environment. Mounting pressure from these belief-driven buyers means that the decisions businesses make regarding their social and environmental responsibilities have big implications for their future success.

Fortunately, companies interested in going green have many options these days when identifying and implementing practices to protect the environment. Businesses can lessen their carbon footprint by incorporating recycling programs, introducing energy-efficient equipment, and manufacturing processes, conducting sustainability audits, reducing single-use consumption, and various other sustainable business practices. Unfortunately, the practices that have the largest impact do not always come cheap. Some green initiatives, like installing facility-wide solar panels or sourcing materials from local suppliers, have higher front-end costs, which is not always feasible for smaller businesses or start-ups.

When the lines between protecting the environment and remaining profitable are blurred, it can be difficult to know what is ethical. The responsibility of businesses to protect the environment raises several ethical questions: To what extent are values compatible with profitability? What are the positive and negative implications of holding businesses responsible for environmental sustainability? Does a business's size and/or industry affect its responsibility? When faced with decisions related to environmentally friendly business practices, it is important to consider all possible consequences and ethical implications before determining what actions to take.



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### CASE STUDY

Deja recently started working as the product manager of a small start-up technology company called Alchemy Tech. At first, Deja was nervous about leaving her old job to move to such a new business. She ultimately accepted the position, though, because she knew she would have the exciting opportunity to help build the company from the ground up.

Deja is interested in developing and implementing a variety of business practices that not only help Alchemy Tech, but also the surrounding community. Deja is most excited about the business adopting “green” processes and procedures that help preserve and protect the environment.

However, when Deja brings up the idea of sustainable business practices in a management meeting, she is surprised that she does not receive much support from her colleagues. Instead, several individuals argue that adopting sustainable business practices is too costly for the new business. Other managers say that they do not know what “sustainable” practices look like and would not even know where to start. The chief operating officer points out that since there is no specific law requiring “green” practices, the company is not responsible for protecting the environment anyway.

After the meeting, Deja expresses her thoughts privately to the start-up’s chief executive officer, Annette. Deja feels conflicted. Adopting sustainable practices makes sense to her, but so many other members of management seem to be against it. She does not know how to convince them that it is the right thing to do for the business, the community, and the environment. Annette listens to Deja’s concerns and suggests that perhaps they could revisit this conversation in a few years, once the start-up is more established.

Deja does not know how to move forward. Should she listen to Annette and her colleagues, agreeing to ignore sustainable practices for the time being because doing so makes the most sense financially? Or should she fight for the start-up to adopt environmentally friendly practices and potentially risk the new company’s future success?

### SUGGESTED QUESTIONS

- How can Deja best demonstrate **integrity** in this situation?
- To what extent should Alchemy Tech be held **accountable** for the impact its actions make on the environment?
- Is it **fair** to expect Alchemy Tech to spend company resources on sustainable business practices, even if not required to do so by **law**? Does this change if the business is not a new start-up, but a large corporation?
- What role could resource stewardship play in the **viability** of Alchemy Tech?
- If Alchemy Tech adopts sustainable practices, should it be **transparent** in its reasons why? Does it matter if a business focuses on “going green” just for its reputation and brand image, and not because it helps the environment? How does this affect public **trust** in a company?
- Should the responsibility of protecting the environment fall to Deja and other employees, who can take many individual actions to protect the environment, or to the business, which can implement company-wide initiatives?

## **The Ethics of Photo Manipulation in Journalistic and Public Opinion**

Technology has impacted media and information in many ways, and it presents some unique challenges. It has become easier to falsify information and make it appear to be the truth. One example of this, is the manipulation of photos, which includes using software to change, alter, or edit photos from their original state.

While doctored photos have been a problem for decades, today's technology makes it simple for anyone to do. It has become nearly impossible to tell when images have been retouched. Photo manipulation could also include positioning, captioning, or using images as evidence in a way that misrepresents the facts. This can be problematic when it influences people's thoughts and actions. For example, one photo of a politician making an unpleasant face paired with a negative headline can drastically impact public opinion – even if it does not represent reality.

In journalism, manipulating photos is generally seen as a distortion of the truth by most media outlets. Scandals have occurred when images have been edited and published by publications such as *Time* and *The New York Times*. However, the standards are different in marketing and social media. Nearly every photo in advertising has been edited and retouched, and people rarely object. When the lines between journalism and advertising are blurred, as they often are in the digital age, it can be difficult to know what is ethical.

Photo manipulation raises several ethical questions. Under what circumstances is it acceptable to retouch or edit photos? Is it just as wrong to retouch an image as it is to change an image in a way that misrepresents facts? Does it matter why the photo was manipulated, or just that it was? Should photo manipulation be considered acceptable now that it is so easy to do so?

These questions should be top of mind for anyone who works in media or who is responsible for informing public opinion. When faced with decisions related to photo manipulation, it is important to consider all possible consequences and ethical implications.

## CASE STUDY

Tina works in the public relations department for a large technology company. The company is planning a huge launch event for the release of its latest mobile phone. Thousands of people are expected to attend and line up to get the latest devices. The company is banking on the launch to boost sales and create positive publicity.

However, when the launch day occurs, the crowds are much smaller than expected, and there are no lines around the corner. Top executives at the company are concerned. The buzz surrounding the launch event was a key part of their marketing strategy.

As a member of the public relations team, Tina is in charge of putting together a press release covering the launch event. As she is working on it, her supervisor, Andrew, approaches her and asks to see some of the photos she is planning to run with the press release.

After viewing the photos of sparse crowds and short lines, Andrew looks unhappy. He asks Tina to give him a few hours to find some better images before she sends out the press release. Tina agrees.

When Andrew comes back, he has a new set of photos for Tina to use. When Tina opens the photos, she is shocked. They aren't new or different photos. Rather, they look very similar to the photos she already had – only they have been edited to make the crowds look much bigger.

When Tina asks how Andrew was able to come up with the new photos, he tells her it was easy: he asked a graphic designer to edit the photos to make the crowds appear larger. He says that no one will be able to tell that the photos were edited, and they look so much better.

Tina tells Andrew that she feels conflicted about the photos and wonders if they are dishonest. She points out that the new photos make it look like the launch event had thousands of people attending when really there were only a few hundred.

Andrew tells her that it doesn't matter because no one can tell, and it's not going to harm anyone. All it's going to do is help the company have a successful product launch. Plus, he tells her, everyone edits their photos these days.

When Tina expresses that she is still uncomfortable with the photos, Andrew tells her that she has to run the new photos, no questions asked. If she doesn't, her press release will be considered a failure, and all of the blowback will fall on her.

Tina is not sure what to do. Should she use the doctored photos that will help her company in the long run? Or, should she use the unaltered images and risk her career success?

## SUGGESTED QUESTIONS

- Is photo manipulation fair? How does it compromise a person's or organization's trustworthiness?
- What are ethical standards related to photo manipulation?
- If Tina used the edited photos, would anyone be negatively affected? If so, how?
- Transparency is an important aspect of ethical behavior. How can Tina be transparent in this situation?
- How could Tina's company have better prepared her for this situation to make sure it was handled ethically?
- How can Tina best demonstrate integrity in this situation?

## **Michigan DECA Ethics Team Event (ETH) 2019 Case Study**

### **Case Situation**

Volkswagen's board members set an ambitious goal to become the world's top automobile manufacturer. They met with the company's chief executive officers, leaders, and top engineers to develop the company's business strategy and set an unrealistic deadline of six months to complete all new Volkswagen prototypes and have them ready for final safety, quality, and performance tests.

Dominic, the board president, holds great power due to his family's controlling interest as a majority stock holder in the company. He leads in a very authoritative style and regularly convinces board members to fire employees who question or oppose him.

Anton, the company's acting CEO, and other executives often secretly question Dominic's ability to make sound business decisions because he does not possess any engineering or business background. As acting CEO, Anton has the power to override Dominic's decisions, but he rarely does so for fear of being fired.

Luca, the head of engineering, informs all the engineering teams about the tight deadline and puts two engineers in charge: Elena and Erik. Both are excited to develop an innovative, new diesel engine that meets the company's fuel efficiency goals.

After a few weeks, the team struggles with the engine design. They have built an engine that reaches the required fuel efficiency goals, but it produces too much pollution to meet environmental regulations.

While Elena and Erik continue to work on the engine, other departments get impatient and frustrated since they cannot move forward with production until the engine is finished. To overcome the stalled production process, Elena comes up with an idea to move production along, while the engine is still in process.

Working with a software company called Xcele, Elena creates a software program known as a "defeat device," since it masks the emission of pollutants. With the software in place as a temporary measure, production teams can move forward with testing various safety, quality, and performance elements of the vehicles – giving them a much greater chance of reaching their deadlines.

Elena persuades Xcele to produce the software by convincing Volkswagen's board members to create and sign a legal agreement that Volkswagen would not allow the software to be installed on cars sold to consumers. Instead, the technology would be used only in testing processes. Using the "defeat device," the engineering teams

complete all the initial safety, quality, and performance tests in record time, while the engineers continue to work on fixing the engine.

With the final inspection deadline just three weeks away, Erik and Elena still have not been able to create an engine that reaches both fuel efficiency and environmental standards. Erik suggests they leave the “defeat device” in place so that the diesel engines appear to stay below required emissions levels. This will satisfy management and give the team more time to develop a solution. He tells Elena that it is common for Volkswagen’s lead engineers to fake test results during the inspection phase. He also tells her that, if they don’t meet their goals, they will likely be fired. Elena decides to leave the “defeat device” installed for the final inspections and continues to work on solutions.

Elena and Erik are unable to find a solution by the deadline, and production of the diesel cars is scheduled to begin. Elena informs Luca, the head of engineering, about the situation. Luca does not show any concern about the deception and tells her that he will find a solution by asking the board to delay the market release date for the diesel vehicles because some of them might have faulty air pollution control devices.

Anton, the CEO, agrees with Luca’s recommendation and suggests that production be halted until the company can assess the situation. Dominic, on the other hand, disagrees with Luca’s recommendation because the new diesel models have some of the highest fuel efficiencies ever achieved, and he is anxious to get them to market. Instead, Dominic suggests that the company recall any defective vehicles on the market. He considers this a small price to pay for all that the company will gain.

Anton and all the executives accept Dominic’s decision to proceed. Luca decides it’s too risky to reveal the “defeat device” now because it would just lead to a big scandal. It could result in many people being fired and would create financial ruin for the company, its suppliers, and even Germany’s economy. So, the company sells diesel cars with the “defeat device” in place, meaning the cars actually exceed pollution-control requirements.

When Elena raises more concerns, Luca explains the problem can be dealt with through a recall. He tells her to just continue working on a solution so that if the affected cars are recalled, the engine flaws can be fixed, and the “defeat device” software removed. He feels that there is little risk to the company since the “defeat device” is nearly undiscoverable, hidden inside over 100 million lines of code that run the cars’ computer operating systems. Besides, he is sure that the engineering team will be able to find a solution to fix the flaw.

When the EPA discovers the cars are emitting 10-40 times more nitrous oxide than allowed, a huge scandal develops. Volkswagen’s board then conducts an investigation

and discovers that the “defeat device” was used to mask emissions of pollutants on a half-million VWs in the U.S. and over 10 million VWs worldwide. Many of the leaders say that they were unaware that the device would be used in this deceptive way and feel that the engineers are at fault.

The situation has the company facing devastating consequences—several lawsuits, costly recalls, plummeting stock prices, and a seriously tarnished image and brand name. Top executives are facing pressure to resign and might even face personal legal action. The board discovers that Elena was the one responsible for the development of the deceptive software and permitted it to be installed.

### **Suggested Questions**

Who should be held responsible for the scandal and why?

What ethical issues are in the case?

Is it ethical to use power when you are not qualified to make well-informed business decisions?

Is it ethical to develop software that has the potential for misuse?

How can employees balance respect for authority with ethical behavior?

How can a company balance its need to be profitable with concern for the environment?

What could the board have done to prevent its employees from engaging in unethical behavior?