CASE #9
SOCIAL MEDIA-- ETHICAL ISSUES AND MORAL BOUNDARIES

"Do you always believe all the communication on social media sources--
Blogging, Facebook, Twitter?"

"The most dangerous thing about power is to employ it where it is not applicable." David Halberstrom

What place have ethics and morality in today's social media environment? As with all new technology, the Internet brought with it a variety of concerns from issues of privacy to abuse, independence and freedom. The fast rise of social media as a (if not the) primary source for personal and corporate communication has raised many concerns. Social media has changed and influenced international geo-political situations, governments, and global financial markets, and impacts everyone's personal life in profound ways. Media companies are now economic giants. In 2010 Facebook had five hundred million subscribers and was worth $25 billion. Now it has 2.2 billion subscribers and it valued at over $500 billion.

Currently, social media has limited regulation, government or personal. Regulation is dependent on the country, culture, and geographic location. Democratic societies have been more laissez-faire to social media regulation. In totalitarian government forms, controls and regulation tend to be stronger.

Social media's acceptance and power have been driven by the younger generations, but older generations have quickly adapted due to the immediacy of the systems. Social media has been adopted by our global society and transcends all cultures and their businesses, education, government, and people.

Social networking sites vary in the levels of privacy offered. Participants are encouraged to provide large amounts of personal information on such sites as Facebook. Some social network sites, such as Match.com, allow people to be anonymous, thus linking a user to their real identity can be difficult.

While social media has many positive benefits, users need to be aware of potential dangers such as identity theft, sexual predators, harassment or stalking, employment background checks, unwanted publicity, online victimization, and loss of privacy through data mining technologies for marketing and advertising. Consumers are now aware of the abuse of Facebook, Twitter and other platforms by entities such as the Russian government to spread disinformation and foment distrust and division.

Ethical and moral guidelines and practices for social media vary widely. Recent controversies have led both Facebook and Twitter to revise their openness policies and examine more critically postings. Twitter has begun removing millions of suspicious accounts from users' followers. Nevertheless, developers of social media tend to operate on the "new frontier" with an innovative, younger, and freer orientation. A ... growing segment of business and government is advancing the need

for ethical guidelines in the use of social media. For example, <u>The Computer Ethics Institute</u> published **The Ten Commandments of Computer Ethics:**

1. Thou shalt not use a computer to harm other people.
2. Thou shalt not interfere with other people's computer work.
3. Thou shalt not snoop around in other people's computer files.
4. Thou shalt not use a computer to steal.
5. Thou shalt not use a computer to bear false witness.
6. Thou shalt not copy or use proprietary software for which you have not paid.
7. Thou shalt not use other people's computer resources without authorization or proper compensation.
8. Thou shalt not appropriate other people's intellectual output.
9. Thou shalt think about the social consequences of the program you are writing or the system you are designing.
10. Thou shalt always use a computer in ways that ensure consideration and respect for your fellow humans.

Note: Computer Ethics Institute (http://computerethicsinstitute.org/)

The following three scenarios detail real situations where social media strongly influenced behaviors and results. Each case has a series of questions on ethics and moral considerations and the role social media played in the end result.

#1: Utilizing Smart Phones for Sexting -- Ethical or Moral Issues?

Anne is a 19-year-old junior in college. She is an intelligent individual who consistently made the honor roll in high school. She is an attractive young woman but had a difficult social life during high school. Anne is a strong, independent person and does not like a lot of the social cliques and their activities.

Anne was asked to the fall dance by Sam, a senior and one of the most popular males in school. She was thrilled and accepted the date. One date led to another and within two months they were an "item."

Sam was more experienced on the dating scene than Anne. As their relationship developed they became more intimate until Anne finally told Sam there was a stopping point. It upset him as he told her he was in love with her. As he pressured Anne, it became more uncomfortable for her. One night after a heated discussion, Sam asked her to take some nude pictures of herself and text them to him as a special birthday present. Sam told Anne many of the serious couples were exchanging such photos.

After a restless night, Anne elected to take the pictures and send them to Sam. Over the next week Anne got up her courage and took a series of five pictures and sent them to Sam on his birthday. Sam was elated and told her he was really in love with her. Some of the sexual stress in their relationship eased.

About three weeks later Anne was confronted by horrifying news from one of her friends. The friend knew about the nude photos. Sam had bragged about receiving the pics with a half dozen of his closest friends. One of Sam's friends got his iPhone and texted a dozen other friends about the nude pix's. Now it seemed the world knew about her nude pics. Anne confronted Sam, but he told her he loved her, and it was just an accident, "no harm no foul."

Anne started having trouble with her academic work, began to withdraw from her usual social relationships, and dreaded going to class. She asked Sam what he was going to do about the situation and he said nothing. Anne was caught in the middle.

Questions
1. Who is responsible for this attack on Anne's reputation? Is it Anne, Sam, the friends or all the above?
2. Can Anne ever retrieve her good reputation?
3. When the students were using their smart phones to instantly send nude pictures of Anne to others, did they consider or understand the ethics and moral implications of their actions?
4. Should "sexting" be against the law or is it a harmless activity? If your answer is "yes", how do you differentiate between what is illegal and what is not?
5. Will this incident remain a part of Anne's personal history?
6. Several recent cases of "sexting" individuals have committed suicide to escape the shame of the incident. Should there be legal penalties for such activity?
7. With the development of new social media apps. like Snapchat designed to delete pictures after a set time limit, does this change the ethical implications of "sexting?"
8. What is the role of ethical and moral behavior in the world of social media-- Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.?

#2: Personal History and the Influence of Social Media on Work & Career Development

Bob is a young management employee in a large consumer packaged goods company. He received his undergraduate degree in liberal arts and then worked several years in customer service and sales. Bob was highly motivated and elected to obtain his MBA from a "top 20" institution. He had numerous job offers upon graduation. He has been with his current company for 3 ½ years receiving excellent performance reviews with two promotions and currently is part of the management team on the company's core brand business.

The company has elected to make a major investment in this core brand business. It will mean important expansion of the management group, but there is a high risk involved. Senior management and Board members are concerned about the high risk. Officers leading this investment for accelerated growth have

committed to the Board that they will staff with the best people internally and/or externally. Specific benchmarks have been established to monitor quarterly progress. The Board's conditions require that if the project does not meet quarterly benchmarks, it will be stopped immediately.

Bob is told he will be in the candidate pool. Selection will be made in the next 30 days with start-up in 45 days.

The 30-day period was almost complete, and Bob had heard nothing. He asked one of the project leaders about his selection. He was informed that decisions were close, but he was doing fine. Ten days passed, and Bob had his meeting with the selection group and was informed he would stay in his current position. Senior management felt he has an excellent future with the company, but he was not ready for this high-risk assignment. Bob was stunned. He inquired as to the reasons why he was not selected. The selection group loved his energy, leadership, intelligence and commitment.

During the extensive vetting, they discovered some personal characteristics regarding Bob that raised concern. The group checked his Facebook and went back to his college years, where they discovered on-line bullying, and remarks that might be considered character assassination. It raised questions about his maturity. The group felt Bob's actions were probably errors of youth, but they did not feel they could take a chance on this special, high-risk project.

Questions
1. Should companies have the right to search into an individual's social media account such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. during times when the employee was not working for the company?
2. Should companies have the right to monitor personal activities of employees? Discuss the issue of the right to privacy. Does posting on social media set aside such rights?
3. Did Bob make a mistake by not informing his superiors about past behavior that might cause concern?
4. When do employee rights supersede the company rights/benefits and when is the reverse proper?
5. When do "youthful indiscretions" cease to influence one's future (for example should one's college marijuana use be considered when discussing a 40 year old job applicant or political candidate)?

#3: **Fake News - Who Do You Trust?**

Before you speak THINK!
T - is it True?
H - is it Helpful?
I - is it Inspiring?
N - is it Necessary?
K - is it Kind?

From a poster in an elementary school classroom

Steve daily checks in on Facebook to see what is happening with family and old friends. It is his major contact with his brother and sister and their families. He enjoys seeing the pictures of his nephews and nieces and the regular contact he has with his siblings. He always felt that this is what social media is all about. It was worth putting up with all the advertising for the connections.

Yet, Steve was becoming more and more concerned with the tone of some messages he received. Many of his contacts shared pictures and posts that attacked those of opposing political views, or of another race or nation. His brother-in-law Eric was a source of many posts that Steve found particularly offensive. Pictures were photo-shopped, news was reported in a sensationalized way, and often Steve wondered, "Is this true?" Sometimes Steve consulted one of several fact checking sites and determined the posts were indeed false. Steve wanted to maintain a good relationship with his sister and her family and wondered how he should respond. Having seen how some people reacted to the shared postings, Steve felt uncomfortable "getting into an argument" with strangers, let alone his family member.

Questions

1. Many politicians and social commentators argue that companies like Facebook and Twitter who profit from the use of their sites have an obligation to better protect the consumer from fake or manipulated news by blocking sites identified with hate groups or with foreign governments like Russia. Some are taking steps to do this. Others worry about censorship and an attack on freedom of expression. What role, if any, should media companies play in controlling content? Why?
2. What actions (if any) should Steve take in response to the false and divisive postings shared by others?
3. Multiple studies indicate that people are more likely to use obscenity and to make personal attacks on social media than they would in face to face conversation. How would you go about restoring a higher degree of civility on the internet?

"No accurate thinker will judge another person by that which the other person's enemies say about him."

Napoleon Hill
American Author