

Case Study

Principles of Ethical Communication in Technology:

Ensuring Transparency in Digital Education Platforms

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Mozilla RCC Project

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INTRODUCTION

The rise of digitalization in the 21st century has made it essential for people to learn how to use technology ethically. The spiking increase in cybercrimes has prioritized effective communication of ethics and data policies among the organization and customers. Each individual should ideally be informed about the extent of data collection and how their personal information is stored, used, and shared. However, unfortunately, many institutions fail to communicate these aspects clearly which leaves users unaware of the potential risks involved. Users may unknowingly provide excessive personal information which is not required for the application to function. Privacy policies, cookies, integrated services, and data-sharing practices are often overlooked by users due to their complex structure and length. People may accept these terms without reviewing the consequences. This lack of awareness about the risks associated with ethics in technology is largely because of three reasons - first, ethics not being communicated by respective organizations effectively; second, education curriculum is not including these real world concepts; and third, users are either disinterested or impatient as they aim to work on the application without knowing about the application.

Furthermore, introduction of "digital consent" is a necessary concept while examining the principles of ethical communication in technology. The inability of communicating these ethics of technology in a clear, straightforward manner may lead to confusion and risks for users. Hence, making this a necessity than a need. The communication of ethical principles in technology use is not only necessary but urgent. It is essential to develop strategies to effectively communicate these ethical issues in a way that everyone, from students to teachers, can understand and act upon.

The principle chosen for case study is: Audience Engagement.

Disclaimer: The following case presents a hypothetical setting, but the underlying data and concepts used are real.

CASE STUDY

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the sudden shift of many schools to online teaching. This sudden change had a significant impact on the education world, where some people could easily adjust to the changes, while others were struggling in this process of adjustment. Many students were adapting to online learning methodologies, many schools were choosing suitable online learning platforms, many existing platforms were developing tools to support online learning, and so on.

Amidst this pandemic crisis, a new e-platform XYZ was introduced to organize data and suture the features of the institution. The platform would increase communication and accessibility among the school, students, teachers, and parents by managing information like educational materials, assignments, assessments, and more. By March 2020, XYZ affiliated itself with a renowned school named APS Academy. Furthermore, the school conveyed the platform's facilities to students via email. The email provided a short description of the site, the rationale behind its collaboration with XYZ, and a link to access the website.

Jake was a class 10 student in the APS Academy. He was directed to the official website of XYZ after clicking the link shared by his school. While registering on the new platform, Jake was asked to enter personal details like name, age, email address, school, school identity card, home contact details, language proficiency, nationality, medical details, house address, and financial status. While making the entries, Jake thought "Why does the application need my financial status, medical details, and house address?" However, Jake filled in the information without further ado, assuming that his school would ensure his data privacy due to the partnership.

While shifting to the next page, Jake was asked to read all privacy policies before proceeding. Skimming through long paragraphs of stodgy policies made Jake feel overwhelmed. He rushed through the pages as he felt irritated by the unclear presentation of terms and conditions. He was also perplexed because of the complex language and ambiguous nature of this information. Being under time constraints added to his frustration leading him to accept the privacy conditions without a thorough review.

Months passed and Jake faced no issues regarding the platform in particular. However, after a couple of more days, Jake noticed a few significant changes in the model as unsolicited advertisements started popping up. His concern heightened when these unwanted interruptions became a routine and started interfering with his regular classes.

Once, he joined another lecture after the lunch break, he noticed significant glitches in his computer system. He tried to restart his laptop and the XYZ application but when nothing worked, he sought assistance from the administrative department of his school. He provided a detailed analysis of his situation to the department expert, Mr. Scott on call.

After understanding Jake's state of affairs, Mr. Scott asked him "Did you read and thoroughly understand all the terms and conditions of the application while registering?"

Jake replied, "Yes sir, I skimmed through the conditions, but I'm not entirely certain if I understood all of it..."

Mr. Scott said, "That's okay tell me do you remember any of the conditions you understood?"

Jake replied thoughtfully, "No sir, not really."

Mr. Scott asked, "Did you observe any peculiar questions while registering?"

Jake recalled, "Sir, although my memories are a bit hazy, I do remember being curious about the need to fill in my financial status, nationality, medical details, and location. But I filled these details as I felt it would be safe to do so as my school was affiliated with the platform XYZ."

Mr. Scott said in a disappointed voice, "Why did you not reach out to me or any other expert in the department when you were uncertain about the website? It is essential to understand the terms and conditions of any application before agreeing to them. I have tried reconfiguring your account, but by agreeing to the policies you have indirectly granted permission to the application to use your data. I would suggest you create a new login ID, while I would try to sort this issue with the platform's team."

This time, Jake followed Mr. Scott's advice and sought assistance before accepting the policies.

Jake required external assistance to comprehend the terms and conditions of the XYZ application. This was because the policy design did not elucidate important considerations. The basic concept of the model's design approach, methods adopted in data collection, data storage, usage, and needs for user data were not presented in a simple manner for a layperson like Jake to understand. Even the security measures and procedure for complaints was very vaguely. The language used was complex and confusing, not allowing for explicit consent. The policies were long, tedious, and boring to read, making Jake impatient. Ideally, this information should be written in points and follow an easy-to-read format. Legal terms should be simplified and explained without organizational manipulation. AI decision-making processes should also be communicated well. The policies should be multilingual to increase accessibility for users. Privacy policies should not be automated but thoughtfully designed by humans. These policies should ideally be fully transparent for the users so that no one else faces difficulties like Jake.

Synopsis: Poor design of the application's terms and conditions. Use with complex language, ambiguous statements leading to miscommunication about ethics in technology.

Keywords: data; policies; ethics; transparency.

Learning Objectives:

- Identify the importance of clear and concise communication in user agreements.
- Learn the important elements of a privacy policy that must be included for transparency.
- Understand the need to get explicit consent in digital applications.
- Identify how complex legal language can hinder user understanding.
- Recognize the needs for multilingual and simplified forms of policies toward better accessibility.

Discussion Questions:

- What are the key elements that should be included in privacy policies to enhance transparency?
- What strategies can be implemented to make terms and conditions more user-friendly?
- In what ways can the lack of transparency in data use lead to ethical concerns?
- How can organizations balance the need for legal precision with the requirement for user comprehension in their policies?
- How can organizations improve the accessibility of their privacy policies for non-native speakers and laypersons?

TEACHING NOTE

Case Overview

This case revolves around a user, Jake, who finds it hard to comprehend the terms and conditions of the XYZ application since the policies offered are unclear and too complicated. Important information is not explicitly explained in the policy agreement which leads to confusion and helplessness.

This case highlights critical issues like the use of complex language, the absence of user-friendly communication, and the lack of transparency in how user data is handled. These factors lead to users relying on external support to understand the terms, thereby resulting in uninformed consent and potential privacy breaches. The case highlights the need for designing accessible, clear, and transparent privacy policies to create user trust and ensure ethical use of technology.

Learning Objectives:

- Learn the necessity of obtaining informed, explicit consent from users.
- Understand how transparency in data use builds user confidence.
- Recognize how legal jargon can alienate users and obscure important information.
- Explore the ethical implications of data collection and usage.
- Identify the broader impacts of poorly designed policies on user experience and compliance.

Discussion Questions:

- What are the key challenges faced by users in understanding complex privacy policies?
- How can organizations simplify their terms and conditions without losing legal precision?
- How can poor communication in data policies lead to ethical concerns?
- How can security measures be better communicated ethically to enhance user trust?
- What strategies can be employed to ensure that privacy policies are not only legally sound but also user-friendly?

Key Teaching Concepts:

- Strategies for simplifying complex information for users.
- The significance of obtaining explicit consent from users.
- Balancing out legal needs with user comprehension.
- Making technical documentation accessible to all users.
- Effectively communicating security measures to users.

Teaching Approach and Methodologies:

- Ask students to brainstorm ways to improve policy design and communication.
- Compare well-designed and poorly designed privacy policies to understand best practices.
- Engage in debates on ethical considerations in data handling and user consent.
- Conduct workshops where students redesign existing privacy policies.
- Analyze real-world cases of privacy breaches due to poor policy communication to understand the stakes involved.
- Simulate scenarios where students must explain privacy policies to laypersons.

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