What a Site!

Description

This case looks at the complicated issues around off-hours internet usage on lab computers.

Body

Setting

Not long ago, at Confused State University, a situation occurred that led some graduate students to think about how Internet access affects their work environment. The university provided Internet access to the entire faculty, staff and students via a university server, which could be used for academic/business or private use. Our drama opens in a small computer room in a federally funded research lab.

Characters

- Jessica, a graduate student
- Frank, a graduate student

Scene 1: Jessica and Frank are using neighboring computers in the lab's computer room. She turns around to ask Frank to take a look at some data with her. Upon turning to speak with Frank, she sees that a pornographic site is downloading.

Jessica: Hey, Frank, can you take a look at this strange micrograph? Oh, I see you're already taking a look at something!

Frank: No, it's not how it looks! I was just trying to type in a web address in the browser window, and this site started downloading! The browser remembered being pointed to a site starting with "s," and it prompted this site to download. You have to believe me. I mean, we've been friends and co-workers now for over three years, and you know this has never happened. I think someone was browsing this site recently, and I'm the lucky one who is now having to deal with their actions!

Jessica: Well, you're pretty fortunate that I know you and that I believe you. I think we have a problem with someone in the lab or someone coming into our lab and looking at these sites after hours and on weekends.

Frank: Do you think it's a lab member? You do realize that the department has a common key that opens every lab in this wing; it could be anyone.

Jessica: I was waiting to see if I could confirm my suspicions before I did anything, but I think I know who it is. I came into the lab on Saturday night to grab a book I needed, and I decided I'd check my e-mail really fast. I walked into the computer room and saw Mark at the computer. He heard me walking in, and he quickly turned off the computer and mumbled an awkward "Hi" and left the room. I sat down to use the computer he was on; the computer prompted me that it had been incorrectly shut down. I figured something was strange, and I just checked the history log on the browser. It turned out there was a nice long list of pornographic sites that had recently been visited. I left and didn't mention anything to Mark. It may have been a coincidence, but I have a feeling he's at fault.

Frank: Have you caught him since?

Jessica: No, but it happened again recently, or you wouldn't have stumbled onto that site.

Frank: I'm concerned that this could happen again to me or to another innocent bystander, and I also think it's wrong for anyone to use our government-funded facility to look at pornography. What should we do?

Discussion Questions

1. Does it matter if Mark is using lab computers to view pornographic sites? What if the sites had been radical religious sites or political sites?
2. Does the fact that this unauthorized computer use is occurring "after hours" matter?
3. What should Frank and Jessica do?
4. Would the scenario have differed if library computers had been used to view pornographic material?
5. How is this situation similar to or different from other people in the lab using the computers for private purposes?
6. Was Jessica justified in checking the history log, or did she infringe on Mark's right to privacy by doing so?
7. Should a policy be widely distributed to inform people about the "ethical" use of computers? If so, how would such a policy be implemented and enforced?

Notes

Brian Schrag, ed., Research Ethics: Cases and Commentaries, Volume 5, Bloomington, Indiana: Association for Practical and Professional Ethics, 2001.

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Discipline(s)

Research Ethics

Publisher

Association for Practical and Professional Ethics
Authoring Institution
Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (APPE)