

Three Case Studies of Ethics in Technical Communication

Directions: Read all three cases, then work with your group to determine the ethical course of action to take in each scenario. Be prepared to defend your position to the rest of the class.

Case #1

You work in the document design department of a large corporation. Traditionally, your department has made it a point of pride to produce dramatic covers for the company's annual report. One of your coworkers finds a reproduction of a famous photograph in a popular magazine and the image would be perfect for the theme of this year's annual report with some cutting, pasting, and a few other modifications.

Since the photograph is famous, since you're going to use only part of the image, and since you're going to modify the image in order to produce something which is essentially a new image, should you go ahead and scan it? Or do you first need to seek permission to use it? If you need permission, who do you ask: the magazine? the publishing house that sells the reproduction? the photographer who originally took the picture?

Case #2

You've been hired to do some desktop publishing work for a large consulting firm. The office manager bought you a new computer system to use, but the system came with a new software package that is incompatible with the old version of the software used by the rest of the office. As a result, you can't share files with coworkers and do your job effectively. Fortunately, however, the office still has the installation disks for the old version of the software, and the office manager tells you that, since these disks were purchased by the company, you can install the old software on your system.

Should you go ahead and copy the software since the office has already paid for it?

Case #3

You're doing research on an article about usability testing. As part of your research, you join an electronic discussion group on the Internet where people doing human factors research exchange email messages about their works-in-progress. As you're writing your article, someone posts an email message to the group describing the results of her unpublished research project. These results are central to your article's thesis and force you to completely revise your thinking about the subject. Since these results haven't been published elsewhere, you wish to quote the email message in your article.

Can you legally and ethically quote from an email message? Indeed, are you obligated to cite the message since it had such a profound impact on your own thinking? If so, does anyone own the copyright on the message? Do you need to seek the author's permission? Or, since the message was electronically "published" by the discussion group, do you need to have the permission of the person(s) who created and operated the discussion group or the university or company which owns the computer that hosts the group?

(Note: All cases adapted from Tharon W. Howard, "Who 'Owns' Electronic Texts," 1996.)