Episode 3: ETHICS OF TECHNICAL WRITING

Introduction to Ethics  
  
Ethics is the struggle to understand what the right thing to do is.

Ethics minimizes damage to society

Ethics maximizes the good to society

(DO THE VIDEO HERE)

By creating ethically minded documents you will

1. Maximize the use of resources
2. Time
3. Energy
4. Promote equity and opportunity by removing cultural barriers to understanding
5. Represent you as a person who can represent the values of your corporation
6. Attractiveness
7. Interest in equity and opportunity
8. Dilligence

So, first, let’s ask: WHAT ARE ETHICS? Let’s go to our correspondent, ME.

(I’m here down the street from my house to show you an example of an ethical dillemma. As you know with Covid-19 it is considered dangerous to promote large gatherings of people, and even small gatherings of people can lead to problems. It would be great if we could lock everybody in their homes, and send everybody enough food to survive in the confines of their home. SO WHY DIDNT WE DO THAT? There are problems with that solution. For example, we would have to create a class of people that is responsible for delivering the food to everybody. What would incentivize them to take on this job? But another issue is just the issue of destroying the economy. If money didn’t WORK for that period of time because you could only get the absolute essentials, would the concept of money survive that? The disruptions to society were considered too great, and so we took this slow burn approach, where we keep making what we need to, YOU KNOW LIKE TV SHOWS. Entertainment is not strictly necessary, but to forbid its creation would be destructive to the people whose lives depend on it. And unless we give away enough money for free, we have to continue to make entertainment. This negotiation between trying to do the minimal amount of damage to a society in the midst of a global pandemic is an ethical dilemma).

The previous example was an ethical dilemma because there was a question about how to minimize the amount of damage to society as a whole. While we agree that any life is precious, the worry is that in order to save as many lives as possible, we would have to sacrifice the economy to the point where money may lose its meaning. if money loses its meaning and new forces seek to take the place of those currently in power.

This is an example of using ethics to try to MINIMIZE THE AMOUNT OF DAMAGE DONE.

We generally believe that people should not harm each other. This is based on the concept that “all men are created equal” and have a right to “pursue happiness”

But when we think about documents, they don’t have the power to hurt do they?

Well, things don’t need to be hard like a club, fast like a bullet, or combustible as a bomb to be destructive. As computer programmers, you are probably coming to the realization that computer programmers have incredible hidden powers, and sometimes they manifest in our world in destructive ways. Social Media algorithms may contribute to depression by creating constant comparisons between people. They may incentivize disinformation somehow, by routing those most susceptible to conspiracy theories to the most delicious conspiracy theories possible.

Our American ethics will tell us that adults should have the freedom to use whatever program they want, regardless of the negative impact they have on society. But even if you think that, you may still think that we have a protected class in our society: children. You may worry about addictive computer games, or Youtube videos that lack educational value. You might still believe that any damage done to future generations through computer programming, is damage done to us all.

Applying ethics to the algorithms that controls social media might help to mitigate some of the harm that it causes, whether or not it can actually do away with all of them.

In video 2, we talked about some engineers, like civil engineers can actually create physically destructive documents. They may provide incomplete information about how to build something, or their design may be straight-up dangerous. Let’s stop thinking so NEGATIVELY. Ethics is not jsut about not hurting others. It is also about promoting equity and making sure that you are not recreating systems of oppression unconsciously. It is also about making sure that you are contributing your best to society by putting your best foot forward. And if you aren’t doing it for society, do it for your family, and yourself. A technical document that doesn’t demonstrate your work to the best of its ability can hold YOU back from achieving your own selfish and evil goals.

So, let’s take a look at how technical documentation can be seen through the lens of ethics.

How can a document be designed in such a way as to promote equity and reduce oppression? Is there a possibility that you are writing your document in a way that the barriers to understanding it are too high?

First let’s imagine that everybody’s time and energy are valuable. By creating a document that is difficult to understand, you are removing a resource from others… the time and energy that it will take to understand your document. At some point, your document may become completely opaque, which will lead whoever wants to use your document to recreate your process on their own, or contact you for clarification. This is a further waste of time. AND MONEY. The ability to create clear documents can show that you have the ability to positively contribute to a corporate enterprise without requiring more of their resources.

Computer Scientists make good money. It is true. Because they learn to speak and manipulate a rare and powerful language, they are hired for their ability to code and make dreams a reality. At least a virtual one. But think about the people who make the most money, and evneutally end up being allowed to guide the trajectory of a business. The Elon Musks, the James Dorseys, and yes even the Mark Zuckerburgs. These people may seem like insane idiots, but at the same time, they are generally pretty careful with the way they present themselves. They are aware that their actions are reflections of the companies that they work for. Every document that exists within these firms are also a reflection of the companies they work for. Therefore, if you can’t produce a document that demonstrates diligence, an interest in clarity and equity, design that doesn’t waste people’s energy wondering why things are laid out in the way that they are, you will be limited in your ability to represent your company.

So make positive decisions in your documents so that the people who have the power to see your project through can use your document, thereby allowing you to represent your company as an attractive enterprise.

You may be able to go even farther and make it so that your document pulls others up. accommodating people’s reading styles, editing your content for clarify, avoiding culturally specific language where possible, and of course using gender-neutral pronouns. REMEMBER HOW MEN USED TO RULE THE WORLD? WELL, ACCORDING TO THAT BEYONCE SONG WE WERE WRONG.

FINALLY, it should go without saying that the documents you create are a reflection of your diligence. Your ability to present a document that actually accounts for everything is a sign that you will be able to handle other projects You should make that your diligence shows within the document by showing what works, and what didn’t. Giving credit where credit is due. AND EDITING THE DOCUMENT.

BUT THAT’S JUST ME: Let’s read some of Mike Markel’s Practical Strategies for Technical Documentation.