

## Facebook, Privacy, and Whistleblowing

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Bonnie is a new research assistant in Professor Capone's chemistry lab at Directional State University. While on Facebook, a popular social networking website, she notices some pictures of the lab in a photo album of another lab member, Clyde. Some of these pictures seem to show action-figures being destroyed using lab resources and equipment. For example, one picture shows a Jar Jar Binks toy being dissolved in a puddle of acid, another shows Power Rangers 'Zords being melted in an autoclave, and yet another picture shows a Cobra Commander action figure having its limbs sliced off with a laser.

The pictures trouble Bonnie for a number of reasons. First, she thinks that these pictures show a blatant disregard for departmental rules that explicitly prohibit using lab equipment or resources for non-research purposes. Moreover, she thinks that some of these pictures show expensive equipment being used in ways that she thinks could easily break it. Finally, several of the other pictures in the album show her and other lab members laughing and working at this same equipment—Bonnie is concerned that the proximity of these pictures in the album could easily be misinterpreted to suggest that she (or these other lab members) are the ones who are using the equipment inappropriately.

Bonnie posts the following comment on one of the pictures in question: “You should probably take these down—it’s not really funny to brag about misusing lab equipment.” Later that day, Bonnie received a hostile message from Clyde telling her, among other things, to “mind her own business”. After reading the message, she noticed that Clyde had “de-friended” her. She also noticed that a couple of other graduate students in the lab have stopped sharing their pictures and wall with her.

Surprised at this response, Bonnie approached Don, a senior grad student in the lab. Don shrugged off Bonnie's worries saying, “We do stuff like that to blow off some steam at the end of the semester. It's sort of a tradition. It's not like we are going to break anything—we know what we're doing.”

“Besides,” Don continued, “stuff like this has been going on long enough that I'm sure Capone has to know all about it. If he hasn't said anything about it yet, it must not worry him too much.”

Don's last comment is particularly troubling to Bonnie, because she was inclined to inform Prof. Capone about the rule violation. But, in light of this new information, she is worried that doing so might strain her relationship with him (as well as the other members of the lab).

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### **Questions for Discussion:**

1. How should one respond to apparent misconduct of another graduate student? Was it appropriate for Bonnie to publicly criticize Clyde's behavior by posting a comment on the picture in question? Does Bonnie have a responsibility to report the misuse of lab equipment to Prof. Capone, to make sure that he knows about the graduate student practice? If Prof. Capone doesn't do anything to end the practice, does Bonnie have a responsibility to inform the department chair?
2. What responsibilities does the head of a lab (or faculty members, generally) have to encourage ethical behavior among his/her graduate students? Do you think that Prof. Capone has done enough to instill an ethical environment in his lab? What responsibilities do senior graduate students have in encouraging ethical behavior among junior graduate students?
3. Some people think of Facebook as being a more private version of the Internet - a place where they can socialize and share information with people of their own choosing. Is this view of Facebook appropriate? Is this the right perspective to take when considerations of misconduct arise? Why or why not? When is it (in)appropriate to share such "private" information with those whom the owner doesn't want it shared?