

## **Ethics of Social Media Behavior: Act versus Rule Utilitarianism**

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This paper compares how act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism principles apply to social media behavior and also talks about how negative comments affect people on social media websites. We will compare and contrast different arguments that can be made for and against the use of negative polemics on these types of websites. We will also give our opinion on where we stand as to negative comments and as to how we think this could be resolved.

### **Introduction**

Utilitarianism is the idea of whether actions are morally right or wrong depending on the effect that it has. Utilitarianism is one of the most influential moral theories known to man. The two most important Utilitarian's are Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Utilitarianism brings one question, what is good? According to hedonism, a term coined by Bentham, the only thing that is good is pleasure. While there are several things that are good, they are considered only instrumental because they are only of importance because they play a role in producing pleasure. Things that good in themselves and are considered intrinsic There are two types of utilitarianism, they are Act and Rule utilitarianism. Act utilitarianism is the theory that a person's act is morally right if and only if it produces at least as much happiness as any other act the person could perform at that time. An example of Act Utilitarianism is stopping at a red light. If a person decides to run a red light instead of stopping and nothing happens because of it, an Act Utilitarian will feel that the decision was still wrong because someone else driving could be

panicked because running a red light may cause an accident. Rule Utilitarianism is the theory an action is right if it leads to the greatest good, or that the rightness or wrongness of the correctness of the rule of which it is an instance. An example of Rule Utilitarianism is that if someone ran a red light, it would be considered wrong because of the moral standards and because it is a governmental rule that you do not run red lights.

There are many different positive aspects to Act utilitarianism. One is that it does not follow traditional rules. For example, the philosopher Immanuel Kant views lying as a wrong doing no matter what the situation. With act utilitarianism, if a murderer would ask person A where person B is, lying to the murderer would be perfectly fine in the eyes of an Act utilitarian. Act utilitarians also view breaking any rule as acceptable if it will do more good as a whole rather than harm. Another advantage is that it shows a person's true belief system. It takes the subjective belief out of decisions making by individuals.

Rule Utilitarianism also has advantages to it. A benefit to Rule utilitarianism is that following the rules as is has more positive results itself. For example, with the previous red light scenario, following all the driving rules that are put in place for citizens lead to a greater chance of safety while driving. Any slight deviation from those rules can put others in jeopardy of injury or police involvement. Also, this type of idealization generates more orderly and efficient behavior out of people as they are always looking at the "is it right?" or "should I do this?" when making decisions and they are more conscientious this way.

With social media, because these outlets allow a user to post anything that user wants his or her friends to see, a user can come under fire due to the posts and the content within them. The postings of certain users on their political views and religious beliefs always come under scrutiny and possibly start virtual threats or backlash because of those ideas. Cyberbullying and other things also happen on social media postings that can have a wide range of effects. The behavior of people on social media with unfavorable posts can cause outrage. With Act utilitarianism, unfavorable or negative posts should not be posted depending on the situation itself. With Rule utilitarianism, under no circumstance even if offended, a negative comment should not be posted.

### **Arguments Supporting Rule Utilitarianism as Guide to Social Media Behavior**

People should never post anything that can be considered negative or unfavorable on social media websites. When people post negative comments they can lead to people feeling depressed and even cause people to harm themselves. There is the case of Megan Meier who was a young teen that lived near O'Fallon, Missouri. She had started talking to who she thought was a sixteen year old boy named Josh Evans on Myspace. As it turned out this was no boy at all, it was in fact the mother of one of her friends that she had a falling out with who was pretending to be Josh. The mother used the account to gain Megan's trust and then she sent the final message to Megan. It said "Everybody in O'Fallon knows who you are. You are a bad person and everybody hates you. Have a shitty rest of your life. The world would be a better place without you." Megan then responded with "You're the kind of boy a girl would kill herself over." After all of the messages were done, Megan was found 20 minutes in her closet where she had hung

herself with a belt. These negative comments sent from a fake Myspace account cause this girl to take her own life. This is yet another case where posting negative comments on social media has led to a negative outcome. There was also another case in Florida where several girls, ages 12 to 14, bullied and taunted a 12 year old girl online until she committed suicide. Rebecca Sedwick was bullied and terrorized for months through online messages and text messages. She had finally had enough of it and committed suicide by throwing herself off of a cement factory tower. One of the comments said to her was “drink bleach and die.” It doesn’t take much to see how these negative comments can affect a young person and lead them to do things that they wouldn’t normally do. There is never a condition where a negative comment is ok to post. Everyone has feeling and some get hurt more than others but the point is that negative comments hurt.

### **Arguments Against Rule Utilitarianism as Guide to Social Media Behavior**

Some arguments that might possibly go against this theory would be someone saying it is ok to bully bullies. Someone might argue that fighting fire with fire would be ok. They could say that if you show can somehow show the bully how it feels to be bullied that they might stop what they are doing and change how they act on social media. All this is doing is just causing harm to even more people. Another argument could say that posting negative comments to keep someone from doing something that you think could socially harm them would be ok. This would be a situation where you have a friend who is going to do something that you think will cause them social harm so you post a message telling them that what they are doing is not a good idea to try and prevent them from doing this. Negative comments are also sometimes used by

people to describe an experience somewhere. This would be targeted more to businesses and could include negative comments. These comments, while they are negative, can be used by the business to fix the problems that their customers have with the business. While these comments are negative in nature, they can have a positive outcome when the business fixes the problems that its customers address with these negative comments. But negative comments should be kept to reviews only and only posted on business sites. Businesses thrive on taking these negatives and turning them into positives, people don't. One can expect a business to change when something negative keeps being posted, but to expect a person to change something about them because one person doesn't like it is not acceptable.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is our assertion that there is no circumstance where it is acceptable to post negative comments toward another person on social media sites. This rule should serve as guide to ethical behavior on social media sites. Also, the creators of these social media sites need to find a way to get this under control. One way would be banning the users from using that form of social media. Although the user could just create a new account, this might help them think a little bit more about how they want the account to be portrayed. Technology isn't going to stop growing and expanding, and more and more teens are getting addicted to social media. These teens are going through lots of changes and react with a lot of emotion when negative things are said about them. This is reason enough to show that something needs to be done to prevent hate from being spread over social media.

## **Recommendations to the Society**

The world needs to stop spreading so much negativity. With most, if not all of the world having access to the internet, due to the invention of smart phones, we all need to be aware of the affects that our posts might have on other people. We need to take a step back and look at what we are posting from both sides so that we can make sure that we are not intentionally harming others. We have a way of delivering information to one another instantaneously at the push of a button. That is a lot of power for one person to have and to misuse this power to spread hatred is a waste. Technology is not going to slow down and wait for us to catch up so we need to start making changes now. If we can get everyone to realize how much negativity can hurt a person, maybe we can change the way people post online and maybe, just maybe, make the social world a better place to post on.

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