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The Ethical Framework of Google

Don't be evil. That is the three-word motto turned informal corporate slogan at technology giant Google to summarize the philosophy behind its code of conduct. Originally coined by a Google software engineer, the now-famous phrase has made its way into the official code of conduct, and now functions as a benchmark against which any and all ethical decisions made by the company are evaluated. Google aims to provide its users with "unbiased access to information, focusing on their needs and giving them the best products and services that [they] can." They believe that if they "focus on the user, all else will follow." This approach to doing business parallels Google's approach to ethics. By focusing on their primary stakeholders, the users, and protecting their fundamental rights, Google strives to follow a moral rights model. However, while protecting basic freedoms, Google still allows the utilitarian model of "the greater good" to influence some of its more difficult ethical decisions. In this sense, Google follows a moral rights framework while simultaneously allowing moral flexibility and small evils for the greater good.

Google has many stakeholders, but its two major stakeholders are its users and its investors. With over 90 million searches each day, Google users play an integral part in the success of the company. At the same time, as a publicly traded company on the NASDAQ with a market cap at 137B, Google has a responsibility towards its investors for growth and increased profits. Fortunately, the early introduction of its "don't be evil" motto allowed Google to place a higher importance on the user from

the outset which is why the company is seen to follow a moral rights model. This framework demands that decisions be made that best protect and promote people's rights to freedom, access to information, privacy, and free speech.

Google's own code of conduct states that: "As we develop great products that serve our users' needs, always remember that we are asking users to trust us with their personal information. Preserving that trust requires that each of us respect and protect the privacy of that information." In early 2005, the United States Department of Justice filed a motion against Google demanding that they turn over the data of one week's worth of Google searches. Google fought the subpoena, defending the privacy information of its users. More than a year later, the court ruled in Google's favor and refused to grant the Department of Justice access to the data.

Google also protects the fundamentally human right to free speech even if it goes against conflicting interests in the company. If this were not the case, a search for "Google sucks" would not return any results. However, a quick search of that text yields 741,000 results: the company does not even censor itself. As Google founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin explained their complex algorithm in their founder's letter prior to their IPO, "Our search results are the best we know how to produce. They are unbiased and objective, and we do not accept payment for them or for inclusion or more frequent updating." In following the unwritten laws of internet neutrality, Google operates by providing equal access to the best information and research, not just to the information people pay to see or place.

There is one shortcoming to the code of conduct's famous mantra "don't be evil." The problem is that the statement is subjective. Its meaning differs based on the reader's particular set of values and principles. In early 2006, Google engaged in a form of self-censorship as a pre-requisite to be able to operate in Communist China. Any searches with a particular mention of politically-sensitive, anti-Communist groups would be omitted from the search results. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch quickly condemned this act and argued its contradiction to Google's very own "don't be evil"

motto. However, Google's moral flexibility allowed it to employ utilitarian tactics and accept a small evil for a greater overall gain. Elliot Schrage, the then Vice President of Global Communications and Affairs released a statement saying: "Our hope is that our mix of measures, though far from our ideal, would accomplish more for Chinese citizens' access to information than the alternative." Google believed that limited access, although in direct defiance of the basic human right to freedom without censorship, produced the greatest good for the greatest number of people at that time.

It is through this moral flexibility that Google is able to fulfill its unique proposition for its shareholders. The company wants to gain a strong foothold in the Chinese market to impress its investors and raise the stock, yet the ethical problems associated with a pure moral rights model would demand non-compliance with any governing body wishing to censor results. The ability for Google to temporarily adopt a utilitarian perspective and do business in China simultaneously provided the Chinese citizens with the world's greatest information exchange tool and Google's investors with a targeted growth plan into the Asian markets. With this new dual-system framework, and much like a compass operates, Google will continue to face North under its moral rights model, remembering that smaller evils for the greater good – just a few degrees away—will always be True North.