Ethics in tech.

You are the hero. Your choices
determine how things ends.

The story of *Silent*

tietoevry   d|lab

Hi... Hej... Hei!

We're so glad you're reading this!

This year we came to SLUSH wanting to talk about responsibility, purposefulness and ethics. But we didn't want to preach.

We have a lot of cool demos at our Tietoevry booth which we really hope you spend some time at. They'll give you some idea about the sort of projects we engage in under the banner of 'purposeful technology'. And as well as being very important projects for us, they are also conversation-starters. We want your opinion too.

We also wanted to give something else, something which you might open during lunch, or over breakfast the next morning, or maybe weeks later you find a link to it on your browser history and have a read.

When you do, we wanted to entertain you by telling you a little story. But this is a story where your choices determine the outcome. You'll be presented with a difficult scenario which you need to solve. The choices are sometimes easy and sometimes really uncomfortable.

We really hope you like it. We also hope it makes you think about how our tech impacts people in unexpected ways and what our responsibilities are.

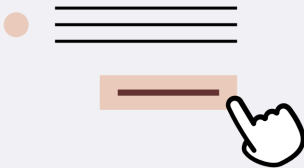We'd be delighted if you want to carry on the conversation so reach out to us at: **dlab@tietoevry.com** or pop by our Tietoevry booth **7B.18** (right beside the main stage) and ask for d|lab.

Regards,
d|lab @ Tietoevry

This is an interactive booklet, simply tap
on your answer to move forward.
Have fun!

You are the founder and CEO of the hottest new social media startup, *Silent*. Your anonymous messaging app has been the top download for 6 months running on both Android and Apple stores. Silent has grown from 2 founding employees only two years ago to over 50 today.

One Monday morning in November you arrive at your office early. It's a big day. You are meeting with no less than three different investors who want to help you grow your business and in addition, you will have a video call with a big social media company. There is talk of a possible acquisition.

You have been having some restless nights and trouble sleeping but you put that down to excitement. Things could not be going any better for Silent or for you.

On the way through your building you pause to chat with some of your employees in the pinball zone. The mood is exuberant, passionate and high-spirited. Everyone feels they are part of something really exciting.

Just then your phone vibrates. It's a message from Maggie, your head of user research. She gives you disturbing news that some schools and universities are going to ban Silent from their campuses due to its use as a platform for cyber-bullying.

Maggie is a worrier. She's always talking about deforestation, or the age of extinction or something similar. Sometimes you suspect Maggie might be clinically depressed. She almost never has anything positive to say. Maybe you should talk to HR about giving Maggie some time off. Her negativity might begin to effect the upbeat atmosphere of Silent.

Still, Maggie is very good with users and her design team are pretty clever people. So maybe you should listen to what she has to say.

You ignore Maggie's mail and your day proceeds as planned. After lunch you get a high score on Mrs. Pac Man and your mood picks up again. You decide to talk to HR about giving Maggie some time off.

Talk to HR about Maggie

You can't shift the sense of dread so you reluctantly call for an meeting of your leadership team to discuss Maggie's mail.

Discuss Maggie's email

You have assembled some of the brightest minds in the tech industry on your leadership team and they are eager to give opinions on how to address the bullying issue. Maggie starts by outlining what the reports are about and she gives some examples of communication she has received. You wish her tone wasn't so dramatic.
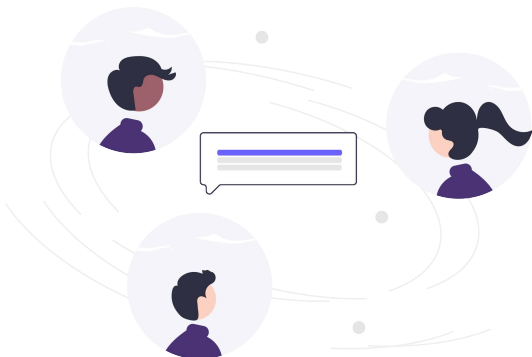
After some discussion there are two main options available to you.

You would like to see how your engineers can solve the problem.

Talk to your engineers

You would like to know where the Silent organization sits in terms of legal culpability.

Talk to your lawyer

As the days and weeks pass the instances of cyber-bullying related to your Silent app increase, as does the media coverage and public concern. It seems like every time you browse to a news site Silent is making negative headlines.

You receive daily meeting requests from parent groups and mental health charities but so far you have not had the time to respond to them.

Reluctantly, you read one first-hand account from a Silent user who was bullied on the platform. It made you very uncomfortable.

Although the majority of users on Silent are never involved in bullying, you start to question the overall impact your app is having. You wonder how much responsibility you should take and if you should act then what should you do?

You meet with the parent and charity organisations and listen to their concerns. You become more vocal in the media with the message that bullying is not something which will be tolerated on the Silent platform. You commit to doing everything in your power to stamp it out. You call a meeting of your leadership team to discuss what can be done.

Talk to your leadership team

You reply to the parent groups and mental health charities that you take the situation very seriously, but unfortunately your busy schedule does not give you time to arrange a meeting.

You don't have time

You start to realise that the core differentiator of Silent is anonymity, and anonymity is always going to be open for abuse. You take a long lunch and afterwards a walk along the pier. It's a fresh winter day, cold but dry. You pass a group of parents with their toddlers in tow, wrapped up against the cold in puffy suits and colourful hats. They shuffle along behind their parents like starfish trying to walk upright.

As you look around you consider the impact your business is having on real people.

Reflect on *Silent*'s impact
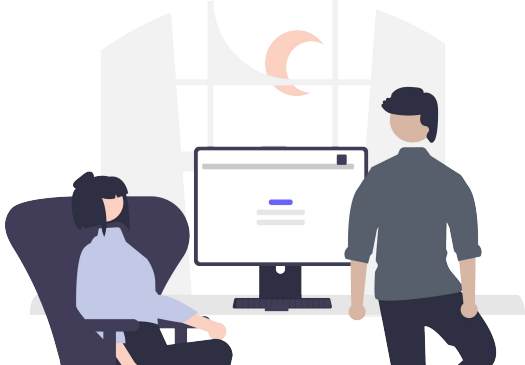
Your head of engineering, Rachel, is one of your closest colleagues. She's a bit strange but she was employee #2 and you two have a great relationship, you think. Rachel is sharp, direct and very solution oriented. She usually starts work late in the evening when everyone else has gone home, and works through the night. You don't mind these unusual hours. In fact this type of flexibility is part of what makes your startup so attractive as an employer. It would be nice if Rachel was able to make it to some of your leadership team meetings, but that's just not possible.

You ask Rachel to meet you that evening when everyone else has gone home and the two of you discuss the problem together. Rachel has the habit of interrupting you when you are in mid sentence, but it's often because she already knows what you are going to say and she has a response ready. You try unsuccessfully not to be irritated. Rachel is simply much smarter than you are – though you would never admit this out loud.

After discussing for an hour you and Rachel agree that her team will come up with some different proposals for how the Silent app could reduce cyber-bullying.

The following week you come into your office to find Rachel waiting for you. She outlines the different options her engineers have come up with.

As she talks you realise that some of the options will cost a lot of money to implement and will damage the financial solvency of Silent and its attractiveness to investors.

The first option is to code in warnings throughout the app that bullying is not allowed on the platform. This is a very low investment and can be implemented within a week. In addition the terms & conditions can be updated to make bullying explicitly prohibited. These steps would be very visible and it would be easy for Silent to show that it is doing something.

Green-light the warnings

Rachel then outlines the next option which is to train a natural language processing engine to identify bullying messages before they are sent. The offending messages would then be blocked and the user would be warned about their behaviour. After three warnings the user's account would be disabled. Rachel is very excited about this option as it relies on cutting-edge AI technology and her engineers would be very enthusiastic about taking this on. It also requires quite a lot of investment and the lead time would be about 10 months.

Green-light the bullying filter

See more options...

Rachel explains to you that you could completely re-engineer Silent to require users to identify themselves during registration. It would mean they can still message each other anonymously, but Silent would know who they are and this would discourage them from behaving badly on the app. In addition a banned user would not easily be able to set up another Silent account since their identity would be black-listed. This option would require heavy investment and the lead time would be 6 months.

Green-light the identity verification

Looking at each of these three engineering options you start to worry about the cost of investment. Maybe this bullying isn't really your problem. You are just a tech guy after all. You can't control people's behaviour.

Talk to your lawyer

You begin to get a sinking feeling that no matter what you do in terms of engineering, people will always find a way to be nasty. Perhaps it's time to take drastic actions with Silent.

Reflect on *Silent*'s impact

Barry Smooth, your company lawyer sits behind his desk in his neat suit. He always smells like expensive cologne and today, as he tents his hands in front of his face, you notice his neat gold cufflinks and manicured nails. Barry Smooth always makes you feel calm, like nothing is as bad as it seems and he has the answer to every problem.

You ask Barry Smooth about Silent's culpability when it comes to abusive texts on the platform. Barry Smooth flashes his perfect white teeth and explains in simple terms that it is not illegal to have an anonymous messaging app. Indeed because the identity of the users is never known to Silent, then you avoid a lot of messy GDPR stuff.

You feel relieved at first but then you realise that he didn't answer your question about culpability. Well, Barry Smooth says. culpability would have to be proved in a court – and there is very little precedent for that. Tech companies like Silent contribute so much to a country in terms of employment and tax revenue. Also, supporting start-ups is a key ingredient of a country's innovation agenda. There's just no appetite to punish companies like Silent. In short, Barry Smooth does not think there is a problem to address, from a legal point of view.

● *You feel much better and decide that the likelihood of any prosecution happening is so slim that you can ignore it.*

Conclude that everything is fine

● *Although you can not disagree with Barry Smooth's opinion you nevertheless feel uneasy about doing nothing. So you decide to talk to your engineers about what could be done in the platform to counter attempts at bullying.*

Talk to your engineers

After that initial scare the issue of bullying vanishes down your priority list. Your user signup figures continue to climb and investors are still more than eager to support your growth vision.

Maggie has resigned from the organisation, which was a shame but at the same time you don't miss her negativity. You have decided to only surround yourself with positive energy. The one person who still dares to voice any concern about Silent is Rachel, but since she works nights then you don't have to listen to her too often.

One morning in November you are on your way to Slush in Helsinki when Barry Smooth your lawyer calls and tells you that more and more schools and universities have banned your app from their canvases, because of its use as a bullying platform. You dismiss this as a media stunt to shift blame for bad parenting onto a tech company. You tell Barry Smooth that schools should really focus on talking to the parents of these teenagers instead. There is a pause on the line before Barry Smooth politely reminds you that is impossible since Silent protects the bully's identity.

You hang up on him, frustrated by his negativity.

Slush is fantastic but there is a strange atmosphere which clings to you. You meet lots of really interesting people but often when they learn you are the CEO of Silent they make their excuses and cut the conversation short. Some people even deliberately walk away from you when they see you coming. Maybe your reputation has taken some damage recently, you tell yourself. But this will soon blow over.

On the final day of Slush you are eating breakfast at your hotel and half watching a news report on the television. The broadcast is muted but the headline shocks you.

Silent app responsible for teenage suicide.

Suddenly you feel everyone is watching you. You get up quickly from your table return to your hotel room where you turn on the news and watch in horror the worst case scenario unfold in front of you.

You are no longer in control of your company's destiny. Within a week all major investors have pulled out. You try to plead your case but it's no good. There are daily protests outside your offices. The majority of your core staff has left and you are struggling to find people to even interview. There is talk of legal action against the company and you personally. Barry Smooth has declined to be your legal representation any more.

Your business is now toxic and will implode within weeks. Your name is globally synonymous with unethical tech.

The future is quite dark and you wonder how it got to this.
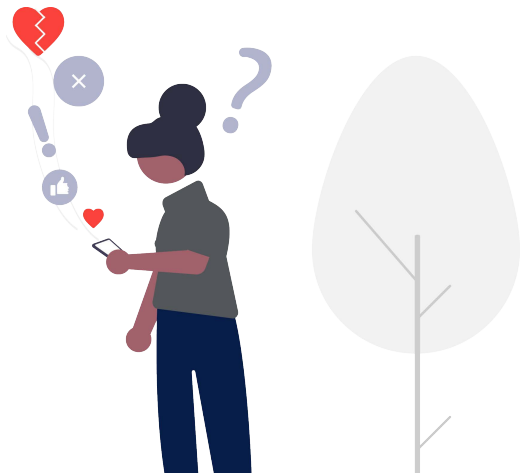
The End

Let's talk!

If you would like to talk about the case of Silent and the topic of ethics in tech then please visit us at our Slush 2022 booth (7B.18 right beside the main stage). We understand that cutting edge innovation needs to matched with robust ethics and we're really eager to hear your opinions about it.

Find us

After a week or so you push out an updated Silent which includes new Terms & Conditions explicitly prohibiting bullying on the platform. This version also includes plenty of warnings about bad behaviour. You do a series of interviews on tech websites expressing concern about cyber-bullying. You also explain that this behaviour is not tolerated on your platform and your new version makes this very clear.

Instances of bullying continue
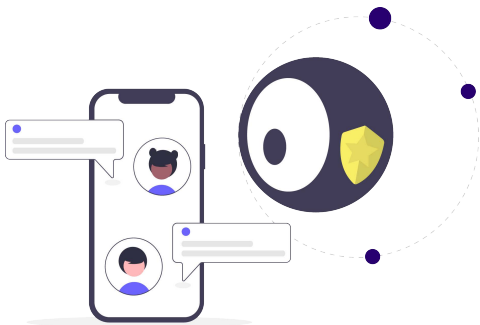
Your engineering department invest heavily in building a learning algorithm which will be able to parse a user's message before it is sent and block it if it is offensive. After some hiccups along the way, which have meant the investment is 50% more than originally estimated, you finally launch the new improved version of Silent with infused AI. You call this capability the *Robot Officer* and you are extremely proud of showing off its capabilities.

After launch the Robot Officer has some initial success and there are hundreds of thousands of blocked messages every day. Over time however this decreases and then plateaus to about a thousand every day. You ask your engineers why this is the case and they explain that even though Robot Officer is learning all the time about what is bullying and what isn't, it can not keep up. Users are much quicker in finding hurtful text which evades Robot Officer. It is a simple fact that if you want to send a mean text, then you will find a way.

Instances of bullying streadily increase

Despite objections from some of your leadership team your engineers implement identity verification into Silent. This immediately impacts existing users who have their accounts frozen until they provide some form of identification. This could be a phone number or address or scanned identity card. There are initial hiccups here as the long lead time to process a verification frustrates users. Eventually, after a few weeks, the hiccups are resolved and the process is quite smooth. However over half of existing users never bothered to verify their identity and have effectively left the platform. In addition the rate of new sign-ups has slowed down.

The difficult truth starts to dawn on you that the key success factor of Silent is its anonymity. And if this is removed then the platform doesn't have a lot of attraction. Your potential investors are not so interested anymore as your user numbers are in decline.

You have some very difficult weeks and months as you try to defend the decision to implement identity verification both to users and to investors, but it doesn't work.

Silent is on a downward trajectory

You realise that implementing identity verification was a bad idea as it meant the end of your key differentiator.

You decide to roll back the changes and launch a new version of Silent which is rebranded as Silent (Shh). Lots of your old Silent users move to Silent (Shh) and thankfully your signup figures start to go up again. Things are getting back on track and in a few years Silent (Shh) is doing as well as the original Silent.

Look forward to a bright future

After a lot of reflection you realise that a business model based on bad behaviour is always going to encourage bad behaviour – no matter how you try to stop it. You are still passionate about technology, but you have also come to understand that innovation is something which can hurt as well as help.

You call a general meeting in the organisation and announce that you are winding up the business. There will be generous redundancy packages for everyone as well as assistance in getting further employment.

The remaining revenue Silent has earned will be distributed among organisations which help victims of bullying.

The media storm is incredible and you receive both praise for being brave and condemnation for being naïve. After a few weeks the news moves elsewhere and you begin to think about your next venture.

Within a year you have started a new startup together with Martha. Your new app *Redirect* helps restaurants distribute unused food to charity organisations. Redirect generates fewer headlines than Silent, and less revenue too. But it is still exciting and rewarding to build something which has an overall positive impact. Also you are sleeping much better at night.

The End

Let's talk!

Congratulations!

You found your way to the good ending by making the right ethical choices. Maybe you got here straight away or maybe you wandered around through the more dubious choices first. Either way, we're really happy you made it.

If you would like to talk to use about ethics and tech then visit us at our Slush 2022 booth (7B.18 right beside the main stage). We need to keep the conversation going!

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Contact us at
dlab@tietoevry.com