

The Secret Lives of Private School Students: The Ethics of Secrecy, Truth-Telling, and  
Whistleblowing within Social Media

“Secrecy is as indispensable to human beings as fire, and as greatly feared. Both enhance and protect life, yet both can stifle, lay waste, spread out of all control.”

Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*<sup>1</sup>

When Elias broke the news to me in the hallway after classes ended that day, my entire world suddenly came to a standstill. I stood there in shock and disbelief as he scrolled through screenshots of the chat on his phone. “When you see a negro getting lynched,” they had said, alongside an image of my classmate’s smirking face. Another had created a meme consisting of a Google images search result with Elias’ full name entered in the search bar and various images of baby orangutans as the search result. Elias and I were the only students in our grade who were of African-American descent. Another meme stated “When ur owner forgets ur rice,” and was displayed alongside a candid photo of Elias’ face. And then, the following screenshot he scrolled to had something different on it: my name.

It was another Google image search meme that featured my name in the search bar and images of Nutella containers as the search result. At that moment, it was as if all the air in the hallway had left my lungs, and I could no longer breathe. Elias kept on scrolling, image after image, and it seemed to last a lifetime. The number of times they had used the words “faggot” and “nigger” was immeasurable. An influx of emotions washed over me. I was angry, confused, disgusted, and hurt. Even now, I still don’t understand the full message or meaning behind what

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<sup>1</sup>Bok, Sissela. *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*. (New York: Vintage Books): 18.

they said about me. My blood began to boil; rage flowed through my veins. How could my classmates, some of whom were my closest friends, have said and created such hateful things?

This scandal occurred in mid-April of 2018 while I was a junior in high school. A group of approximately twenty students from my grade had created multiple Whatsapp group chats that ridiculed and mocked dozens of other students in the form of memes and other verbal statements. This group targeted students on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, physical appearance, and mental health. In addition, this group of students had also made use of a wide variety of offensive ethnic and sexual slurs in their conversations.

I attended a private high school of a relatively small size, with an average of seventy students per grade. In a sense, everyone at my high school indirectly knew each other. It was the type of environment where I could recognize other students and classmates outside of school, even if I didn't know their names, because there were so few of us. However, because there were so few of us, a lack of diversity within the student body became an apparent issue that our school ultimately faced. In my grade alone, besides Elias and I, there were only three other students of color. As for the entirety of my high school, there were only about fifteen.

In the 24 hours after Elias had shown me his phone, the entire high school had either seen for themselves what my classmates had posted or at least knew of it. Screenshots of these group chat conversations spread across the student body like wildfire. The hallways were extremely quiet the next day, and a feeling of sorrow lingered in the air. School administrators made an announcement to the students during our assembly about the current situation and voiced that they would take the appropriate action. As a result, a handful of individuals at the group's center were suspended from campus for almost two weeks, while most others were only suspended from campus for three-to-four days. There was a wide variety of things created and

said among this group, with some individuals encouraging this behavior more than others and some individuals just observing and not participating in active conversation.

During one school-wide assembly after all of the suspended students from the group chat returned to campus, the administration required every single participant in the group chats to each apologize for their actions in front of the entire student body. Based on their apologies, it was clear that some of my classmates regretted what they said more than others. Some were ashamed of the things they said, and others were only ashamed they were caught. Administrators had also announced that a committee would be established in order to appropriately judge this dilemma and arrive at the most ethical conclusion. This committee was made up of several members of the administration, several of the victims' parents, and an out-of-school specialist. Ultimately, none of the students who engaged in this group chat were expelled from school, even though a great number of the things said and images created were worthy of expulsion. In fact, to my current knowledge, this situation did not appear on any of these students' records, which almost seems to imply that it didn't happen at all. Over time, life at school slowly drifted back to normal, and by my senior year, the majority of my classmates had forgiven them and had forgotten that this ordeal had even occurred. However, one of my classmates and closest friends was not so quick to forgive. Instead of forgiveness, she wanted to exact revenge on them for the sake of justice.

This friend, who shall be referred to as Mia, was inclined to share and send images of these screenshots to not only local media organizations, but also to all of the universities that this group of students was applying to in hopes that they would ultimately deny admission on the basis of what they had done. At the time, Mia had a large following on social media as both a journalist and an activist. In addition to having connections with various local news

organizations, she was one of the most strong-willed and determined individuals I had ever known. She was the kind of person who never backed down from a fight, and I was so sure that she was going to leak this information. In the end, Mia didn't release any of this information to the press or send any of this information to the universities. The school administrators became aware of the fact that Mia was considering leaking this information to outside sources and demanded she stop what she was doing, essentially claiming that it was not her place to do so. Mia had several arguments and disputes with members of the school administration over the next few weeks on the subject. Mia chose to transfer to a different high school in the area due to their disagreements and clashing opinions on the matter.

In the view of Swedish-American philosopher Sissela Bok, secrecy is considered to be one of the most sacred aspects of the self and an essential aspect of human nature. Secrecy allows us to guard our privacy and friendship, but also allows for dishonesty, deception, and the concealment of unethical practices. However, Bok presents a certain argument in defense of secrecy, in which she maintains that an individual should keep one's identity, plans, actions, and property concealed from others. According to Bok, truthfulness requires that we intend to tell the truth, while lying requires that we intend to deceive others by knowingly passing along a falsehood. Bok regards the notion of truth as knowledge that is both perfect and unattainable, as it's impossible for humans to be omniscient and most 'truths' are, in reality, just perceptions and interpretations. Falsity, on the other hand, is imperfect knowledge that is offered with the intent to deceive others. Bok formed a moral hierarchy in regards to lying, and classified them from the most to least moral: the little white lie, the well-meaning lie, lying to liars, lying to enemies, lying to protect clients, and lying for the greater good.

Both truthfulness and secrecy are at the center of this ethical dilemma, as the members of these group chats successfully concealed the truth from school administrators and the rest of the student body for several months, even years. In fact, if Bok's argument in defense of secrecy was applied to this dilemma, members of the group chats would have been encouraged to keep their plans and actions concealed, which would have been extremely unethical and immoral. Bok states within her book, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*, that "whatever the essence of truth and falsity, and whatever the sources of error in our lives, *one* such source is surely the human agent, receiving and giving out information, intentionally deflecting, withholding, even distorting it at times."<sup>2</sup> Bok's defense of secrecy is only applicable in circumstances when these plans and actions have no intention of harming or causing pain to others. If not, this practice would ultimately promote individuals to conceal various unethical and harmful practices. These students initially had no intention of telling the truth, and if they hadn't been caught, would have carried on with their lives and continued to deceive the rest of us. However, this ethical dilemma began when one member of the group chats, referred to as Nathan, decided one day that the group chats' activity was becoming too extreme, ultimately choosing to come forward to school authorities as a whistleblower.

The term 'whistleblowing' can be defined as making public a disagreement or unethical practice within a certain group or place. Whistleblowing is not only seen as a form of dissent, but also as a breach of loyalty since these assertions come from within. Bok claims that responsibility is at the heart of whistleblowing, as it contains an accusation of a present threat and singles out specific individuals or groups as responsible. In this ethical dilemma, Nathan's decision to come forward to the administration displays a certain sense of responsibility on his part, even though Nathan largely acted as a bystander and did not contribute to the creation of

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<sup>2</sup> Bok, Sissela. *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2011): 8.

these memes. However, since Nathan was a part of these group chats, his decision to bring their actions to light was most definitely seen as a breach of loyalty and trust by his co-members, as this information came from within the group and was presented to the administration in the form of screenshots of the group chats.

Bok presents a model in order to determine if the event is worthy of whistleblowing. Bok's model contains four elements: the problem revealed should concern the greater public, determine the problem's degree of impropriety, the problem should be revealed in the fairest way possible, and can the situation be remedied from within? Within this ethical dilemma, the incident most definitely concerned the greater public, as a wide variety of different individuals across the school were targeted. In terms of the dilemma's degree of impropriety, the threat presented by the members of these group chats could be considered imminent due to the plethora of hate speech and offensive material. It would have been impossible to remedy this dilemma from within, as it had an effect on the student body and unwillingly involved a great number of other students outside of the group chats.

In Bok's discussion on whistleblowing, she also examines the concept of leaking information and how it's fundamentally different from whistleblowing. Bok defines the concept of leaking information as the covert disclosure of a certain unethical practice within a particular group. Bok asserts within her writings that leaking information may not need concern danger or abuse in specific situations, and that leaking information does not require the accuser to take responsibility for the action. Within this ethical dilemma, Mia was originally inclined to leak screenshots of the group chats to local media organizations and the universities to which this group of students was applying. Even though Mia did not end up sharing these images with local media organizations and universities, in the end, she considered her options covertly and did not

make any public statements on the matter. Her interactions were solely with the school administration and some of the more culpable members of the group chat, thus, a great number of people in the student body had no knowledge of her plans.

If Sissela Bok were on the committee of administration members, parents, and other individuals who had ‘appropriately’ judged this ethical dilemma, she would have most likely not been surprised by the behavior of these group chats’ members. Bok maintains that secrecy is a fundamental aspect of humanness, regardless of the secret’s nature, as secrecy can be motivated by both benevolence and malevolence. Bok may arrive at some of the same conclusions that this committee had come to, especially with regard to truth-telling. Bok would have required these members of the group chats to apologize publicly and take responsibility for their actions in front of the entire student body, which is exactly what happened. However, one area that Bok and the committee may have differed on is the discussion of expulsion. Despite the fact that the committee and school administration came to the conclusion of suspending a few students for a maximum of two weeks, Bok would have most likely been in favor of expelling these students, as the weight and consequences of their actions were worthy of expulsion. With respect to Bok’s defense of secrecy, it would be interesting to see how Bok would encounter and approach this situation through this lens. In this case, a specific set of circumstances is presented within this dilemma that renders her defense of secrecy unethical, and would ultimately not provide a moral or acceptable outcome. However, it’s possible that Bok could have made an exception for circumstances such as these—where hate and harm were being created by the secrets.

Theories from other prominent philosophers, such as those from Emmanuel Kant, could also prove to be useful in attempting to analyze and resolve this dilemma. From Kant’s perspective, truth-telling is the single most important consideration in ethical decision-making.

Kant believed that human beings inherently possess a special intrinsic worth, which he referred to as ‘human dignity.’ He believed that this ‘dignity’ stemmed from our autonomy, as humans have the capacity for goodwill and the ability to make sound and rational decisions through the usage of our conscience.<sup>3</sup> Certain actions, such as lying, cheating, and stealing, are always considered ‘wrong’ and immoral within Kantian ethics. Other actions, such as truth-telling and benevolence, are always considered ‘right’ and virtuous within Kantian ethics.

If Kant himself were on the committee of administration members, parents, and other individuals who assessed the nature of this ethical dilemma, Kant would have unquestionably supported the possibility of expelling these students, as Kant would view their dishonesty and deception as always being morally wrong and unethical in any circumstance. However, Kant may have been in agreement with the committee in regards to the situation concerning Mia. Her initial plans, while truthful and honest, could be interpreted as being unethical due to the underlying motives behind her actions: retribution and revenge. However, Kant would have applauded Nathan for his forthrightness and honesty, as he went out of his way to tell the truth.

One of Kant’s most well-known philosophical concepts, the ‘categorical imperative,’ is also applicable within this ethical dilemma. Kant defined the notion of a categorical imperative as a specific set of moral principles that all individuals must follow, regardless of their own judgments and personal circumstances. Kant believed that one should treat others with respect and act in accordance with rules that could be applied to any individual. Reason is one of the most significant aspects of Kant’s categorical imperative, as Kant argued that moral law is a truth of reason and that individuals should act rationally and without bias. In one sense, Kant’s categorical imperative can be utilized as a way of evaluating the motivations of a specific plan or

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<sup>3</sup> Schönecker, Dieter, and Elke Elisabeth Schmidt. “Kant’s Ground-Thesis. on Dignity and Value in the Groundwork.” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 52, no. 1 (2017): 81–95. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10790-017-9603-z>.



action. Within this ethical dilemma, Kant's categorical imperative can be useful in attempting to determine the motivations behind the actions of both Mia and the members of these group chats.

It was evident that Mia's intentions were rooted in revenge and malice, as their actions caused Mia a great deal of pain and emotional turmoil. Mia had a desire to hurt them just as badly as they hurt her, but leaking the screenshots to the public wouldn't have healed the wounds they inflicted on her. Nathan's underlying motivations, on the other hand, may have been rooted in justice and truth, as he could no longer bear continuing to sit idly by while these injustices transpired. However, there is a possibility that Nathan's actions were rooted in fear, as he may have feared the chances of being caught more than taking responsibility and being truthful. In terms of attempting to understand the underlying motivations of this group of students, one could assume several things. One interpretation is that these students acted on the basis of social gain, as individuals who behave in this way largely do so to maintain or advance their social standing in hopes of being perceived as well-liked and popular. These types of behaviors oftentimes highlight an underlying power imbalance within the social sphere, as some students target other classmates who belong to marginalized or minority communities. Another interpretation is that these students acted on the basis of humor, and that they created this content because they believed it was amusing and humorous. However, from my perspective, it's extremely difficult to imagine that any material akin to this would be amusing, as these types of materials are immersed in hate, ignorance, and discrimination.

The central ethical concern within this dilemma is twofold. The first was the lack of action taken against these students by the school administration. At the end of the day, justice did not prevail. The atrocities these students committed were deserving of expulsion, and despite the mild punishments students received at the time of the incident, they ultimately went on to lead

normal lives; most of them are now seniors at their respective universities. Even during high school, months after these events occurred, it was as if the majority of the student body had simply chosen to not only forget the events that transpired, but also to continue being friends with these individuals as if nothing had happened. I, however, have not forgotten; I will never forget. The second was Mia's determination and willingness to release this information to the greater public and the press. Through her actions, Mia had blurred the lines between justice and retribution, and even though I still have not forgiven any of these students for the things they said and did, I felt uncomfortable with what Mia intended to do. Enough people had been hurt, and the possibility of me destroying my classmates' future opportunities did not sound appealing to me, despite all of the things they said and posted about not only me, but also my friends and fellow classmates. That's not the person I wanted to be.

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