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Case Analysis 1.4: Google Street View

With the roll out of Google Street View throughout the world, Google was faced with a lot of scrutiny about how it was collecting data. What types of data was being publicly displayed and how it was being collected were major issues. For Street View specifically, it could include people walking down the street, their faces, their families, their homes, their car license plate numbers, what school bus their kids rode. All kinds of personal information would be collected and displayed without their permission to anyone on the internet. As Google advanced their application of Street View to other places in the world they were met with push back but had already planned a public relations campaign where they would state they were blurring faces and license plate numbers as well as taking down images upon request. Google was setting out to violate people's privacy while allowing them to later find and request them to remove information that Google had collected and released publicly already. In this case analysis I will argue that Kant's categorical imperative, the concept of respecting others and not using them even if you believe it's for the greater good or good for them shows that Google acted immorally. Using Kant's perspective I will argue that Google should have started Street View with different goals, targeting businesses and corporations that

would willingly allow Google to Map or Image their property which could lead to people being able to navigate corporate cities and high traffic areas easier without violating individual privacy.

The answer to Luciano Floridi's question "Why have Information and Communications Technologies made privacy one of the most obvious and pressing issues in our society?" can help understand the problems with Google Street View. Floridi answered his question about ICT's by stating that ICTs affect information friction. Floridi defines informational friction as "forces that oppose the flow of information within a region of the infosphere" (Floridi, Pg.2). If we think about what data Google is gathering and making public we can easily see how it affects informational friction. Google Street view is making a lot of information that is not available to just anyone, available to anyone, which is directly impacting informational friction by making certain information easy to obtain. If you want to see what someone's house looks like and possibly what vehicles they drive and maybe even a license plate or security system installed on their home you can access that information just by clicking on a map. By reducing informational friction and making all this information public Google Street View directly impacted the infosphere and they did it without caring about their impact or how they would affect privacy. If we compare the actions and impact of Google during the Street View rollout to Kant's categorical imperative on respect we see how Google violated this concept by directly disrespecting everyone and everything it included in its Street View images. Google took the images and posted them, allowing users to request images to be taken down after the fact. I think it's a well known sentiment that

what gets put on the internet is forever, it never just goes away. Google's actions are directly disrespecting everyone it affects and is using others and their private lives as a means to profit. This is also another example of Kant's categorical imperative relating to respecting others and not using them. Based on Floridi's observations of ICTs impacts and Kant's views on respect Google should have started out only imaging and making public those business and state run structures that were directly approved first before heading to people's homes and posting every home and building attached to a drivable road on the internet.

Another one of Floridi's views comes from his view of the small village vs the Global digital village. Within a small village every resident knows each other and has a good idea of what will make local headlines within the public. What actions they do will be the talk of the town, like who is dating who or who just broke up. If there are new people in town, new neighbors to go and greet and then talk about who they are and where they came from. These things you could naturally expect and the privacy you expect is relative to the privacy you give or don't give others. If you are at a diner talking about how you don't like how loud somebody's truck is then you can expect others to be talking about how prissy and stupid your Prius is. This is echoed in Kant's view of respect with the sentiment of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." But in the global digital village there are no rules, people are anonymous they don't live around you, they can see and say things about you without anyone around you knowing about it. You can't defend yourself and you may never even know your information is being passed around. In the Global digital village there is no mutual

understanding of what information is public or private and all information that exists is fair game. Google Street View started in the global digital village and completely bypassed the small village. They didn't test out their platform and decide how people would react, or maybe they did? And they didn't care how they would impact others. Google should have started in the small village and tested what information was acceptable to collect and given some respect to those they would violate for profit instead of acting as a Global digital village with no rules or fear of consequences.

Grimmelmann asked the question "Is the loss of privacy in social media something lawmakers ought to worry about and, if so, what should they do"? (Grimmelmann, Pg. 795). Grimmelmann answered this question by establishing myths about privacy and security and using examples of breached privacy within facebook and other platforms such as Google Buzz. Grimmelmann discussed four myths that he used as a basis to show examples of how the social media product was flawed or needed work as a product. One myth was "Facebook Users don't care about privacy" (Grimmelmann, 798). This myth was disproven with data showing that most people actually do care about privacy and users do act in ways that show they want privacy. But, this is overshadowed by the type of people who post their whole lives on the platform for anyone to see, celebrities, influencers, models and people who are looking for attention and disregarding their privacy to get it. These people stand out but they don't represent the majority of facebook users.

Grimmelmann concluded that social media and internet products should be applicable to some sort of product safety and product liability laws. Where the products

themselves should be held under scrutiny and accountability for their mistakes and breaches of privacy. Several of the privacy myths that Grimmelmann discusses involve user interaction with the product or platform. Users in most instances were unaware of who was actually seeing the pictures they were uploading or pictures they were telling. The platforms themselves were not making it clear what constituted friends and family or “networks” of friends and family. The one example was sharing a picture of friends and family, one of your friends being an organization within New York city which includes over a million people, all of which now have access to your friends and family photos. Users were unaware of these types of things but it was not something that facebook cared about or was being held accountable for. So this is where applying facebook as a product and putting it under a set of safety and liability laws could help increase facebook's transparency and also encourage them to advance on or fix their product to help things like that not happen. Some of the examples in Grimmelmann’s work showed how people assumed they had an element of privacy and found out later they did not from examples such as people being fired based on their facebook posts, the logging of data for advertising categories. Applying Grimelmann’s views towards Google Street View would be an interesting concept. That Google Street View would be treated as a product and could be subject to privacy and safety laws that could hold Google liable in the event their service was used to harm or invade someone's privacy unknowingly. Kant would likely not see either of these options as viable since putting these companies under law doesn’t change the initial intentions of violating everyone's privacy and respect on the creation and implementation of Google Street View in the first place since it didn’t start out respecting anyone but instead violating and

disrespecting everyone unless you emailed them and asked for your privacy and respect back.

The work of Floridi and Grimmelmann showed that there is no perfect answer and a lot more questions and conversations that need to be had on privacy concerning Information and communication technology. But, the implementation of Google Street View was done without a single thought or without care of who and how it might affect. The Google public relations campaigns were all set up to gaslight people and countries with concern to Google's methods and the cultures it may affect. After applying Kant's categorical imperative to this situation I see that Google showed no respect for anyone and just implemented something they knew would be a gain for them but at the cost of privacy and respect for everyone they exploit. Google's only clear starting point should have been to start with places that allowed them to be added to Street View and then it likely would've been stopped there and it's pretty easy to say that Google knew this and decided to conduct themselves in a way that best benefited their company with no respect or regard for anyone or anything else.

References

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