

In the googlization of everything, Siva Vaidhyanathan describes how Google launched Street view with almost no public warning, Scanning and showcasing everyone's neighborhood, people, and even possible private moments without consent. Although Google framed street view as a tool to help users navigate the world, The initial approach exposed sensitive details such as faces, license plates, open garages, kids outside which leaves people uneasy and exposed. Vaidhyanathan explained that the company adopted a "capture first, apologize later" approach, assuming that any privacy concerns could be addressed after the fact rather than before the data collected took place. This strategy placed a burden on individuals to discover that their information was being put out there and then proceed to request its removal. The result was a global backlash and growing concern that Google was normalizing large-scale surveillance under the gaze of innovation.

In this Case analysis, I will argue that consequentialism shows Google should have implemented street view in a more ethical manner, one that minimized foreseeable harms, respected community expectations, and prevented unnecessary exposure of people's private lives. Using Floridi and grimmelman, I will show that a responsible rollout would have required transparency, public consultation, and built in privacy protections before any imagery was captured.

Luciano Floridi's work in information ethics provided a framework that goes beyond the traditional idea of privacy as simply keeping information hidden. For Floridi's individuals are "information being's" meaning that information about us such as our home, our

surroundings, our habits is part of who we are and what makes us. Because of this, the way information is generated and circulated in digital environments directly affects our dignity and our ability to function as normal people. Privacy violations are therefore not just about embarrassment or exposure; they destabilize what Floridi calls “informational integrity,” the sense of self we get through the control over our personal data. When Google’s intervention in that informational sphere interferes with consent, they interfere not only with what people know about us, but with how we exist in the world of information.

Floridi’s also discusses the idea of “ontological friction” meaning that natural boundaries limit how easily information flows. Before digital technologies, this friction existed everywhere as someone might walk past your home and glance at it, but they could not instantly share that view with millions and store it indefinitely. Google street view dramatically reduces this friction by making high resolution images globally visible, searchable, and persistent. According to Floridi, reducing friction is not automatically unethical; however, when friction is removed in a way that harms individuals or disrupts their informational environment without consent, the action becomes morally problematic.

Applying Floridi to the street view shows why Google’s rollout model as photograph first, deal with complaints later was ethically poor. By capturing and publishing images of people's lives without warning, Google altered their informational identities without their knowledge. Someone who never intended to reveal what their home looked like, whether their garage door was open, or whether that had a security system visible suddenly had

their information indexed, archived, and accessible to anyone with internet access. This is precisely the kind of information distortion Floridi warns about: individuals no longer had control over how they were represented in the informational world, and Google became the dominant architect of the digital version of their physical environment.

consequentialism strengthens Floridi's critique by focusing on the quality of outcomes produced by Google choices. The harms were foreseeable: people were stalked using street view images; domestic violence survivors had their locations exposed, and private moments were captured and circulated. Even seemingly harmless exposures such as a home layout or a car parked outside can create a long-term risk. Google prioritized convenience and innovation over these predictable harms. From a consequentialist standpoint, this imbalance fails ethically because a morally responsible rollout would have reduced or prevented these negative consequences while still allowing street view to exist.

A more ethical implementation, guided by Floridi and consequentialism, would have started with transparency and consent. Google could have issued public notices months in advance, collaborated with local governments, and created opt out systems before capturing any images, they could have adopted stronger default protections, such as automatic blurring of homes rather than just faces and license plates. These steps would have respected ontological friction by ensuring individuals retained control over their informational identities. In short, a more ethical rollout would have focused on minimizing harm and empowering users rather than assuming people would accept the consequences after the fact.

James Grimmelman approaches privacy differently from a slightly different angle than Floridi with emphasizing not identity but control. For Grimmelman, privacy is not secrecy; many aspects of life occur and happen in public and are visible to others. Instead, privacy is about managing information about us. Even public people expect a degree of practical anonymity as someone might see your house, but they cannot instantly store an image of it to analyze and share it with others or even revisit later down the line. Grimmelman argues that technologies become privacy invasive when they increase informational power asymmetries, especially when ordinary people cannot realistically influence how their information is collected and used.

Street View perfectly illustrates this imbalance. When Google sent camera cars through neighborhoods around the world, individuals had no say in how, when, and whether their homes and surroundings were photographed. They did not know images would be taken, did not control what the photos showed, and did not give Google permission to publish them. Even though the streets were technically public, the scale, detail, and permanence of Google's data collection transformed public visibility into something closer to surveillance. Grimmelman emphasizes that privacy harms arise when people lose the ability to negotiate how they appear in informational spaces. Google's approach left no room for negotiation.

Consequentialism again provides a strong ethical lens. The harm was not speculative they quickly became real. Sensitive sites such as shelters, rehabilitation centers, and domestic violence safe houses were exposed. People were photographed in humiliating or

compromising situations. Criminals used street views to scout homes and plan burglaries.

None of these outcomes were unforeseeable; they were natural consequences of

removing all barriers to informational flow without offering individuals meaningful control.

A more ethical approach, according to Grimmelmann, requires preserving people's ability

to shape their informational presence. This does not mean eliminating Street view entirely

but rather designing it to respect the privacy and control of individuals in their everyday

lives. For examples, google could have implemented proactive opt out systems by mailing

notices to households or working with local municipalities to inform residents. They could

have allowed homeowners to request blurred or removed imagery before publications, and

community consultation would have shifted informational power back towards the people

being recorded.

When combined, Grimmelmann and consequentialism show that the ethical failure

of Street view was not the technology itself but rather the process and way in which it was

conducted. Google treated people as objects within a dataset, not as participants with

rights and expectations. A more ethical implementation would have recognized that even

public information must be collected and shared in ways that honors and respects

individuals to their right to privacy and how they appear to the world. Empowering people

with control would have reduced turmoil and harm as well as preserved autonomy, and

strengthened trust, all of which is consequentialism identifies as morally relevant

outcomes.

In summary, consequentialism shows that Google should have implemented Street view in a way that minimizes foreseeable harms and respected people's ability to control how they are represented. Floridi's information ethics demonstrates that Google disrupted individuals' informational environment without consent, exposing intimate details of their lives. Grimmelmann's theory of privacy as control further reveals how Street view deprived people of meaningful participation in decision about their public visibility. Together, these frameworks support the view that a more ethical rollout would require transparency, community engagement, and built in privacy protections before any images were captured.

One possible objection is that Street view provides enormous social value such as improving navigation, supporting businesses, and offering convenience to users worldwide. While these benefits are true and real, consequentialism requires weighing them against the preventable harms caused by Google's unilateral decisions. Another objection is that the streets are already public, so photographing them should not raise concerns. But this ignores Grimmelmann's point that scale and permanence transform public information into a different category of risk.

Ultimately, Google could have achieved the same innovation while reducing harm. The broader implication is that technological progress does not require sacrificing privacy. Ethical design, public participation, and respect for informational autonomy must guide future innovations.

