

Bridgette Chapman

9/25/24

Ethical Implications of Google Street View and Privacy Concerns

Introduction

Google street view is an influential component of Google Maps, which allows users to travel around the world's streets and neighborhoods by offering a panoramic view of cities and villages. People have praised its usefulness, using it for navigation, tourism, and property search when buying a house. The service is beneficial to businesses and individuals because it involves precise street view imagery, making planning for trips and getting familiar with geographic locations easier. However, it's important to note that google street view has raised significant ethical concerns in the real world, including privacy. In the present case analysis, I will also be able to show that the utilitarian approach is a lesson that Google should not have captured people's homes and properties through Google Street View without their consent.

The strategy would have ensured the delivery of the technology's social value, while simultaneously safeguarding the privacy rights of the service users. In 2010, Google faced criticism after reports surfaced that google street view, while capturing street-level photos, collected users' personal information like emails and passwords from unprotected wireless networks. The scandal, commonly known as the Wi-Fi data collection scandal, led to legal proceedings and penalties in several countries, including a \$7 million payout in the US.

Likewise, people from different parts of the world have come forward to share their experiences where their homes, cars, and even their persons were visible on google street view without their consent. Occasionally, google street view cameras captured subjects in awkward or provocative poses, causing them embarrassment and distress. Google street view cameras, which

photographed over high residential walls in Japan, nearly brought Google to its knees for invasion of privacy. These are real-world examples of the conflict between advancing technology and furtherance of privacy rights.

Utilitarian Analysis

Consequentialism is the foundation of utilitarianism, which determines right or wrong based on the consequences of an action with the goal of increasing general utility. The utilitarian principle holds that an action is moral if it maximizes the good for the majority, taking into account the need to minimize harm(Saaida). The approach balances the general utility against individual sacrifice, aiming at the maximum net gain. When it comes to analyzing the service that is google street view, the framework of utilitarianism is particularly helpful. Google street view has the following advantages for society: navigation, assistance in the search for real estate, and tourism. But these are benefits that have to be weighed against harm, such as violations of the privacy of individuals.

Here, **google street view** infringes on the privacy of people's homes, cars, and personal space, thereby violating their rights, a **practice that is considered unethical**. A utilitarian evaluation establishes whether the overall benefits to society outweigh these privacy violations, or if we should adopt a better ratio. There is no doubt that google street view has offered substantial positive impacts to society. For example, it has changed the approach to navigation so that the user can 'look' around streets and neighborhoods, determine the best way to get to a place, and analyze what the unfamiliar territory holds. The impact on real estate has also been significant, as potential buyers or renters can virtually tour properties and the surrounding area.

It has been particularly beneficial in situations where there is limited physical contact, such as during the current COVID-19 virus outbreak. Tourism has also received a shot in the

arm. google street view lets users virtually tour a place, whether a landmark, an attraction, or a place they may be planning to visit or never get to visit in real life. Also, by integrating Street View images into their websites, businesses provide customers with a possibility to ‘walk through’. These are a few samples of how google street view has enhanced the availability of geographical information, saving millions of people’s lives.

However, these advantages are associated with severe privacy issues. For example, after learning that google street view had taken and published photos of people’s homes and other personal properties in Germany, many people sued the company. Google responded to the public's concerns by offering an option for users to request the obscuring of their properties on google street view(*Thousands of Germans Opt out of Google Street View - BBC News*). It has led to more than 244,000 requests from German citizens to opt out of the service. The case illustrates the utilitarian dilemma: while google street view provided significant benefits to society, it seemed to violate the privacy rights of numerous individuals. The conflict between the common benefit and the equal rights of individuals remains one of the most pressing questions.

Google faced legal penalties in France for privacy violations associated with Street View. In 2011, the French Data Protection Authority (CNIL) fined Google €100,000 as it emerged that while capturing street-level images, Google’s Street View cars were also capturing data from unsecured wireless networks(*France Fines Google over Street View Data Blunder - BBC News*). The unauthorized data collection contained the name, email, password, and website browsing history of thousands of people. Despite being smaller than expected from a dominant company like Google, the fine sent a clear message that the European data protection regime would not tolerate privacy infringements.

It raises ethical concerns about the use of big data projects that do not take privacy into account. In this case, Google said that the collection of data was accidental, but the French authorities stated that the company acted improperly and did not report to the public or ask for permission to collect such personal information. Illustrating the real-life consequences of weak privacy standards and using the example of people unaware of the potential compromise of their personal data is crucial. While Google Street View proved to enhance society's interests in areas such as navigation, tourism, and accessibility, the aspect of non-consensual and often opaque data collection harmed the public's trust.

The state demonstrates how technological advancement can sometimes have adverse effects when managed inappropriately; it triggers legal and ethical reforms. From a rationalist perspective, the absence of valid informed consent in Google Street View casts doubt on the service's overall utility, as it protects the majority's interests at the cost of individual privacy violations(Rakower). Thus, google street view does not provide a way to obtain prior consent, and it may expose personal details such as images of homes, vehicles, people in compromising positions, etc. While these harms are present at a lower rate, they can be distressing to people and invasive of individual volition.

A consent-based approach could have prevented such harms by giving people control over the use of their property and likeness. In Italy, the privacy activists were able to force Google to give at least three days' notice before photographing specific areas. Residents were able to implement actions such as driving off cars or closing doors and windows, which instilled in them a sense of valued privacy. The method is not an ideal solution, but it shows how the introduction of a consent-based preventive approach could have mitigated damage and retained

the benefits of the service. Ensuring widespread use of google street view without infringing on residents' rights would have been the best possible outcome for the community's happiness.

Conclusion

Therefore, based on the present scenario and the real-life applications of the technology in question, the utilitarian view on Google Street View is not entirely clear-cut. While the service undoubtedly offers significant benefits to society, such as enhancing navigation, assisting businesses, and providing virtual tours, the ethical dilemma arises from the unconsented capture and sharing of numerous people's homes and personal spaces. Google has faced legal actions and fines for violating privacy in Germany, France, and Canada, while public pressure in Japan and Italy has compelled the corporation to change parts of its activities.

These examples demonstrate the company's inability to obtain consent prior to presenting private properties and spaces, resulting in additional suffering and a violation of the utilitarian concept of pleasure. A better practice would have been to get users' permission or create a better way to opt out of the service. If Google valued privacy and reduced its negative impact, it could have served the public interest while better protecting rights. And as technology advances, companies must design and produce products and services that are valuable to society while remaining ethical in their processes.

Works cited

France Fines Google over Street View Data Blunder - BBC News.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-12809076>. Accessed 25 Sept. 2024.

Rakower, Lauren H. "Blurred Line: Zooming in on Google Street View and the Global Right to

Privacy Recommended Citation BLURRED LINE: ZOOMING IN ON GOOGLE

STREET VIEW AND THE GLOBAL RIGHT TO PRIVACY." Brooklyn Journal of

International Law, vol. 37, no. 1, 2011,

<https://brooklynworks.brooklaw.edu/bjil/vol37/iss1/8>.

Saaida, Mohammed. Introduction to Consequentialism. no. April, 2024,

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/379822659_Introduction_to_Consequentialism/](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/379822659_Introduction_to_Consequentialism/link/661cb7a739e7641c0bc8f714/download?tp=eyJjb250ZXh0Ijp7ImZpcnN0UGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIiwicGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIn19)

[link/661cb7a739e7641c0bc8f714/download?tp=eyJjb250ZXh0Ijp7ImZpcnN0UGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIiwicGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIn19](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/379822659_Introduction_to_Consequentialism/link/661cb7a739e7641c0bc8f714/download?tp=eyJjb250ZXh0Ijp7ImZpcnN0UGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIiwicGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIn19).

[6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIiwicGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIn19](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/379822659_Introduction_to_Consequentialism/link/661cb7a739e7641c0bc8f714/download?tp=eyJjb250ZXh0Ijp7ImZpcnN0UGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIiwicGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIn19).

Thousands of Germans Opt out of Google Street View - BBC News.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-11595495>. Accessed 25 Sept. 2024.