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Case Analysis 1

“I wonder what the next block of houses looks like...Let me get on Google Street View and find out!” Google Street View (GSV) is used by many people in the United States, after all, its deployment originated from there. The excerpt from, “The Googlization of Everything (AND WHY WE SHOULD WORRY),” by Siva Vaidhyanathan described not only the intrusiveness of privacy people felt towards Google’s product but also the benefits the product had for society. “Critical suspicion of Google Street View faded after a few weeks.” (Vaidhyanathan) An important perspective was introduced; how new technology can cause an initial excitement and bring along with it scare and worry. In this case, it formulated concerns regarding people’s privacy, identity, and personal property that could link to identity. However, this scare and worry quickly dissipated in quick timing after the debut. Another point of interest that was brought to attention dived deeper into privacy, the boundaries and varieties of laws concerning privacy, and the cultural aspects that Google had to circumvent. “I immediately saw it as a useful tool to be added to my toolbox.” Said David La Peña, an architect who responded to the author’s inquiry. Despite privacy issues, an underlying key motive was overlooked by many critics. From a utilitarian perspective, Google Maps Street View promotes the greatest good by fostering economic growth and providing educational resources, making it a valuable tool that enhances societal welfare.

Luciano Floridi elaborates on the concept of empowerment and its connectivity with anonymity when discussing privacy. Empowerment, Floridi states, “empowerment as inclusion and empowerment as improvement,” is worthy to relate to the purpose of Google Street View in a utilitarian approach. First, an analysis of “empowerment as inclusion” in which Floridi explains that the meaning of this is people are part of the, “decision-making process, as opposed to marginalization, exclusion, or discrimination.” Google faces privacy issues, more so, when its services expanded to other countries with varying and stricter privacy laws. In this face of adversity, Google is obliged to adhere to these laws to continue its Google Street View, giving the different governments jurisdiction and partial control. The majority of the fundamental concerns were people’s identities which transpired to connect personal property. This starts to connect Floridi and his mentioning of anonymity, a form of empowerment of the people. Also, Floridi views empowerment not just as control over personal information, but also as inclusion of the “inforgs inhabiting the infosphere.” (Floridi) The “inforgs” have control to have images blurred or redacted in Google Street View and Google also cited their awareness of due diligence, “if anyone reported an image to be troubling, embarrassing, or revealing of personal information such as faces or vehicle license plates, Google would be happy to remove or smudge the image.” Transitioning towards the second concept, empowerment as improvement, creates a more definitive claim in utilitarianism. The term informational friction is tossed around by Floridi, synonymous with privacy. Antique Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), Floridi, calls it, the tools before the digital modern-day landscape, relaxed privacy, but seemingly only unidirectional. Modern-day ICT’s have a bidirectional flow in terms that can constrict and dilate privacy. GSV relates to this bidirectional flow of information. External factors set limitations to GSV to allow for its operation, in this case, governments and people. The purpose

of GSV is to equip society with a tool that has beneficial use for all. “Doctorow wrote to me that he had written much of the novel while living in Los Angeles, but had done a lot of globe-trotting during that time, as well. “I think I was writing from Heathrow that day, or possibly Croatia.” (Vaidhyathan) Anyone with internet access can explore remote locations, plan travel routes, or even access areas they might not be able to visit in person due to financial, physical, or geographic constraints. Inclusively, this brings equitable access to information that can enhance decision-making, navigation, and exploration for many people. The inclusion provided by GSV benefits a large portion of the global population by making once-exclusive geographical data accessible to all. For example, students in underdeveloped areas can virtually explore museums or cultural landmarks, and businesses can gain visibility on a global scale. This widespread access maximizes societal utility, as more people gain from the service than are negatively affected by the potential erosion of privacy. Empowerment benefits a vast majority of users leading to the enhancement of their lives in both practical and meaningful ways, fulfilling the utilitarian principle of maximizing societal well-being while minimizing harm.

The excerpt from James Grimmelmann’s “Privacy as Product Safety” discussing users’ privacy on Facebook, ties well within Siva Vaidhyathan’s expression on GSV. Privacy is emphasized throughout Grimmelmann’s literature as lackluster control by Facebook. Further intervention in law is debated. It is noted that Facebook, although an open platform for connection and communication, calls for strict privacy. This is comparable to GSV. GSV, too, has a global reach of public street view and draws to capture people’s private properties to be exposed. Grimmelmann mentions, “carefully modulated privacy management is everywhere,” just as in GSV, agents of both platforms, have a form of control that can set limitations to bar invasions of their privacy. Aside from setting their profile to private in which only approved

friends can view their profile and access information, Facebook users can, “use fake profiles, fake names, fake ages, and a cloud of other lies to keep their profiles safe.” (Grimmelmann)

Forms of control in privacy are in the user’s arsenal. Similarly, GSV offers privacy controls that allow individuals to request the blurring of sensitive data, such as their home, face, or license plates. This ability to control one’s exposure provides users with the power to protect their privacy while still allowing the service to function for the greater good; paving the way to user control as a key to maximizing utility. Grimmelmann defies the myth that Facebook users’ desire for privacy is unrealistic. An explanation is made about explicitly confidential conversations with a limited extent and boundaries. Emphasized in this context, was the analogy, “people are willing at least to say a few things about themselves on Facebook that they would not shout from the rooftops,” (Grimmelmann) drawing in the idea that people have a responsibility for their privacy aside from the product of Facebook. Grimmelmann emphasizes that Facebook users share some responsibility for managing their privacy by choosing what to share and how to present themselves. This analogy extends to GSV, where individuals have a shared responsibility to safeguard their privacy by taking proactive steps. The responsibility to manage privacy does not rest solely on Google; users are integrated in this as well. By allowing people to request blurring, GSV provides a balanced solution that maximizes societal benefit while allowing individuals to protect their privacy. In a utilitarian view, this balance achieves the greatest good for society, as GSV continues to function as a beneficial public service, while privacy concerns are addressed when necessary. Also reinforced by Grimmelmann through this shared responsibility is the notion, that privacy is a shared responsibility for the greater good. Vaidhyathan’s respondent, an architect, expressed their appreciation of GSV toward societal growth and expansion. “We are trying to locate a new community center within a low-income neighborhood on foreclosed

fourplexes,” said the architect in his response, expressing the value of GSV. The public benefit of GSV, expressed previously shows contribution to navigation, commerce, and education, outweighing the privacy risks when users are empowered to take action. This reflects the utilitarian principle of maximizing social utility while minimizing harm through individual responsibility.

Privacy is a concern and for each individual, a threshold varies. The United States Constitution's Article I, Section 8, Clause 8, also known as the Intellectual Property Clause, gives Congress the power to promote the progress of science and useful arts. This clause is very relevant to privacy and the dilemma of GSV. There is a quid pro quo present in favor of a society in sacrifices for the few with a demand for more friction in privacy. The majority would benefit from what GSV has to offer, trading off the minimal amount of privacy. It is shown that the greater utility of providing accurate, real-time geographic data to billions of users outweighs the limited privacy concerns when proper safeguards like face-blurring are implemented. In opposition, “stewards of their own online privacy,” (Grimmelmann) and, “to defeat Google’s default settings, you have to be looking out for yourself, your property your family, and your neighborhood,” expresses the concern of invasion then rehabilitate method, analogous to, “guilty before proving innocent,” which does not bode well to judicial construct. Assault then repair, is also a valid view of GSV concerning privacy. Then again, GSVs benefits rule by significance in the lesser amount of privacy concerns.

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