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Case Analysis 1.4: Google Street View

Google Street View is a tool developed and maintained by Google LLC based out of Mountain View, California, United States of America. It was released in 2007 to certain cities in the United States and then later that year expanded to most of the United States. Google Street View offered a unique experience when it came to satellite imaging such as planning for traveling, shopping, or just reconnecting with your past experiences. But in the months and early years of its production people became weary of the breach of privacy and safety it may offer since there were no initial privacy policies in place. In this Case Analysis, I will argue that consequentialism shows us that Google should have created initial privacy policies and considered people's concerns before releasing this potentially dangerous imaging system.

As stated before Google Street View is a satellite imaging tool created and managed by Google LCC to provide “real-time” street view photos of popular areas. When the street view was first released back in early 2007 it was praised to be the next best thing around when planning a trip or just reminiscing about your past experiences. It offered an experience that no other company offered or really even still offers today. Utilizing a mixture of “Google Cars” and satellite imagery to bring in a 360-degree view of the surrounding area. “Google Cars” is, at least

in the United States a Chevy-branded sedan, fitted with a 360-degree camera and real-time data-uploading hardware.

But in the few months that proceeded after the release, some people did not approve of the new application. The primary concerns in the United States consisted of people not wanting to be photographed without their consent and invasion of privacy with their properties. Now some people wrote to Google and stated their concerns while others skipped that step and tried to sue them, unsuccessfully of course. But the concern rose across the United States and eventually led to some computer-driven blurring added to the program to get rid of PII (Personally-Identifiable Information). Now with the readings from Floridi this week, he brought up some interesting points regarding privacy. The one I am going to use is Anonymity, which is the act of being anonymous. This really is what people wanted when they complained about the possible invasion of privacy that street view would have created. Having their personal information such as their license plates and themselves from being on the internet or Google street view. Of course, anonymity is not really useful in this world of technology because someone can always find your PII if they were looking so it is really a false sense of security or in this case privacy.

With Google knowing that there was a possible invasion of privacy risk in the United States they should have created policies to deal with that risk. One of the solutions to fix the PII being on street view was developing a computer-driven program to automatically blur people and license plates on request. This policy was not even included or even thought about in the initial United States release but instead only thought about when they wanted to expand to Canada.

Now using the tool of consequentialism we can say that since Google did not think of the risk of privacy and did not immediately try to fix it on all regions of the world, then they would be at fault for invasion of privacy. From the consequentialism point of view, we can state that since there was a “bad” consequence such as people getting upset and not using the platform due to that lack of privacy and anonymity they crave then we can presume that it was a bad action on their part. In this case, what Google should have done was create street view but with a fully tested and working image blurring software for humans, cars, and any other PII such as house numbers. This would have allowed other countries like Canada to use it out-of-the-box and other people to have that sense of privacy with anonymity. Of course, knowing how cyber attacks work with PII that sense of anonymity in the street view would be false and just a “feeling” of privacy within them.

In addition, in consequentialism, we tend to make decisions based on the consequences and the impact that would affect others due to that person's actions. With Google’s Street View, they simply did not take into account individuals' security and anonymity because they thought it would be okay without them. So in turn they were making the right decision or at least that's what they thought. Turns out that they did not so that would put them into a weird standing and back in the mindset of consequentialism their actions would have made their decisions to be bad. In this case, the only way for Google to bring itself back into good actions. They would need to introduce security, and privacy, and take into account other countries' laws. Without this redeeming action, they will always be in the bad since their actions had a bad consequence.

Now with the readings from this week by Grimmelmann, we can see that he talks about privacy as a product. This way of thinking or “scheme” is basically stating selling a product with privacy attached or selling privacy with the side of the product you want. For instance, he states that a company has a duty to ship its products with a sense of security and privacy for its users. In this example with Google Street View, they did not really take that into consideration when initially creating the application. They simply thought that it would be nice to have a tool and possibly a big money maker. Like most big companies they threw their user's information into the wind and carried on without thinking about how this could affect people.

They did not even realize the risk or did not want to admit them until some people in the United States said something along with Canada saying no you can not have that system in our country due to privacy laws. The United States and Canada were not the only countries that had a problem with the system initially, other countries like the UK and some other European countries. Most of those countries either had very strict privacy laws such as no photos without consent or no street photos at all. This posed a problem with Google, now knowing what the issue was they decided to make a computer-driving blurring program to recognize humans and cars and automatically blur them. This now tightly fits with the consequentialism view again since they now are faced with a bad action which turned into some bad consequences.

As stated before Google should have considered the privacy laws of the United States, Canada, and a few other countries just to start. If they would have considered the privacy laws then their street view service would have been allowed in many more countries, thus creating an even bigger success of the street view. With a bigger success with street view, more countries

would be more lenient in allowing the street view app into their country. Thus creating a good action that would result in a good consequence, so then everyone would get along and no privacy would be invaded.

Google Street View created and managed by Google LLC out of California, USA is a somewhat controversial topic when it comes to privacy. With the initial release back in 2007 with little to no regard for privacy in the images such as allowing license plates and humans to be identified on the app. After getting multiple complaints and countries telling them that they do not want their app due to privacy issues. Google slowly conformed to privacy laws and blurred images that had PII. Looking at this issue through the eyes of the readings this week and the ethical tool of consequentialism we were able to figure out what Google should have done looking back at the whole situation. This not only shows that companies who you know and trust with your information, do not always work in the interests of privacy.