

Maintaining Privacy from Digitization of Google Street View

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Privacy is the most valued possession in every aspect of our lives in which it protects us from being taken advantage of, ensures that we are confident in ourselves to live freely and happily, and above all it gives the overall benefit of relief that we are not completely exposed for the whole world to know our personal information or struggles. Today, with the vast occurrences of cyberattacks and data breaches, whether or not someone immorally uses it to perform bad deeds, privacy matters to all as an end for themselves in order to strengthen their character and logic to respect themselves. A perfect case to represent this issue is Siva Vaidhyanathan's, *Googleization of Everything*, where the implementation of Google Street View is explored for its prominent uncensorship of people's faces, license plates, details of public, private, and residential properties without proper consent, including the issues faced to abide by the privacy laws of other countries during the app's growing popularity and the public attention that followed shortly after. In this case analysis, Kantianism will be argued to show how Google should've made a public announcement to see what people think about Street View's implementation before release.

The term Kantianism states that our actions are hugely derived from our pure ethical reasoning, based on our own autonomous logic rather than any religious faith. It is a form of *deontology*, which is the broader term meaning it is someone's best reasons for acting on something whether it is right or wrong. Relating to Street View's privacy case, Luciano Floridi's account of privacy in "Privacy: Informational Friction" gives us the conceptual tools to understand precisely what kind of harm Street View caused before we can even begin to judge Google's conduct against a Kantian standard.

Floridi explains privacy through the idea of "informational friction," the natural resistance that limits how easily information flows between people. When friction is high, information stays contained; when friction is low, it spreads freely and instantly. Historically, even as

technologies like photography and the telephone lowered friction, most people retained a kind of practical anonymity: someone might see your face on the street, but that glimpse was fleeting, local, and quickly forgotten. Floridi argues that digital ICTs are unique because they collapse friction and anonymity at the same time, turning a passing, forgettable exposure into a permanent, searchable, and globally accessible record. On top of this, Floridi rejects two common but inadequate ways of explaining why privacy matters. The first, which he calls reductionism, says privacy is valuable only because of its consequences, such as avoiding embarrassment or unfair treatment, but this cannot explain why a privacy violation still feels wrong even when no measurable harm follows. The second, the ownership theory, treats personal information as property that a person owns and can therefore lose, sell, or forfeit by stepping into public space; this fails because information is not used up or transferred the way physical property is, and it cannot explain why people still deserve privacy protections in public places. In place of these, Floridi proposes that personal information is constitutive of who a person is, in the same way memories or a body are; a person does not simply own their face or their home address, they are partly made up of that information. In this view, a privacy violation is less like theft and more like an intrusion on someone's very identity.

Applied to Street View, Floridi's framework reveals exactly why Google's implementation was more than a minor inconvenience. Google's vehicles drove through neighborhoods capturing faces, license plates, and the exteriors of private homes, then indexed and published these images permanently online, searchable by address and viewable by anyone in the world. This is precisely the friction-and-anonymity collapse Floridi describes: a person walking down their own street previously enjoyed a kind of practical anonymity even while technically visible to any passerby, but Street View converted that momentary visibility into a permanent, globally

searchable record tied to their exact home address. Google's implicit defense, that these were public streets where no one could claim ownership over the space, is really an appeal to the ownership theory of privacy that Floridi rejects. A person's face and their home do not stop being constitutive of their identity simply because they are visible from a public sidewalk; being photographable in passing is not the same as consenting to permanent, searchable digital exposure. Floridi's self-constitutive theory therefore shows that Street View did not merely publish neutral facts about the world, it altered, without consent, information that helped constitute who thousands of people were and where they were vulnerable, from domestic violence survivors whose location could now be found in seconds, to individuals photographed leaving medical clinics or in compromising moments they had every reason to think would go unnoticed and unrecorded.

Assessed through Kantianism, this friction-and-identity collapse becomes a clear moral violation rather than a mere technical side effect. Kant's Formula of Humanity holds that we must treat every person as an end in themselves and never merely as a means to some other goal. Google's rollout of Street View treated the constitutive information of millions of people, their faces, their license plates, the visible details of their homes, purely as raw material for building a commercial mapping product, without asking whether those individuals rationally consented to that use. Because this information helps constitute who those people are, appropriating it without consent is not just an inconvenience to be weighed against Street View's usefulness; it is a use of persons as mere means to Google's commercial ends. A public announcement inviting feedback before release, as this analysis argues Google should have made, would have respected people as rational agents capable of consenting to or objecting to the use of their own constitutive information, rather than treating them as passive data points to be captured first and placated

later through opt-out requests and after-the-fact face-blurring. Floridi's concept of privacy as self-constitution and Kant's demand that persons be treated as ends, not means, converge on the same conclusion: informing the public and inviting genuine input before launch was not an optional courtesy but a requirement of respecting the dignity of the people whose identities Street View put on display.

James Grimmelman offers a different, and more practically oriented, lens through his "privacy as product safety" framework. Grimmelman argues that when a piece of technology causes foreseeable harm to its users, we should evaluate it the way tort law evaluates a dangerous consumer product, asking whether the designer chose a reasonable alternative design, whether the danger was foreseeable, and whether adequate warning was given. Central to his framework is the idea that a seller cannot simply disclaim responsibility for harm to a person by hiding behind fine print or a terms-of-service agreement, and that a product is defective not only when a single unit malfunctions but when its entire design creates unnecessary risk. Just as a car manufacturer is responsible for an exploding gas tank even if no individual driver did anything wrong, Grimmelman argues that a technology company is responsible for a design that predictably exposes its users to harm, especially when a safer, still-useful alternative design was readily available.

Street View fits this framework closely. The unblurred capture of faces and license plates was a foreseeable danger, not a freak accident: it was entirely predictable that stalkers, identity thieves, or abusive ex-partners could use the service to locate specific people or vehicles, and that ordinary residents would be upset to find images of their own homes, driveways, and even themselves published without notice. This is precisely the kind of design defect Grimmelman describes, comparable to the auto-add contacts feature in Google Buzz that he analyzes as a

defective, unreasonably dangerous product design. Crucially, a reasonable alternative design existed and was not merely hypothetical: Google itself later implemented automatic face and license-plate blurring technology in response to public backlash, proving that a safer version of the product was both technically feasible and compatible with Street View's core usefulness. Under Grimmelmann's framework, the fact that Google eventually adopted this safer design at a stage after harm had already occurred, rather than before release, is itself strong evidence that the original, unblurred rollout was an unreasonably dangerous design choice, not an unavoidable cost of an otherwise sound product. Grimmelmann's framework also emphasizes the duty to warn: residents whose homes and faces were about to be photographed and permanently published received no notice at all, leaving them unable to close their blinds, move their cars, or simply be aware that a specific, searchable photographic record of their address was about to enter global circulation.

Read through Kantianism, Grimmelmann's product-safety analysis strengthens rather than competes with the Floridian argument already made, because it shows that Google's failure was not merely a matter of insufficient consent in the abstract, but a concrete, foreseeable, and preventable harm that Google chose not to prevent in advance. Kant's ethics places significant weight on honesty and on respecting people's rational capacity to protect themselves, and a company that knows a design is dangerous, yet withholds a warning or a safer alternative until after the damage is done, is treating affected people's well-being as subordinate to the convenience of shipping the product quickly. This is again a violation of the Formula of Humanity: people were denied the information and opportunity they needed to exercise rational agency over their own exposure, whether that meant objecting to the rollout, requesting their home be excluded, or simply being prepared for what was coming. Grimmelmann's framework

demonstrates that the safer design was not some impossible ideal Google could not have foreseen; it was a known, achievable option that Google adopted only under pressure. That fact makes the case for this analysis's thesis even stronger: had Google made a public announcement before release, as Kantian respect for persons required, the foreseeable dangers Grimmelmann identifies could have been raised, discussed, and addressed, whether through opt-out mechanisms, advance blurring, or delayed rollout in sensitive areas, before a single unconsenting person's face or home address was published to the world.

In conclusion, the concepts of Floridi's self-constitutive theory of privacy and Grimmelmann's product-safety framework, both point to the same Kantian resolution: Google should have made a public announcement to invite feedback before releasing Street View, rather than capturing and publishing people's faces, license plates, and homes first and addressing objections afterward. One might object that people have no reasonable expectation of privacy on a public street, so nothing wrong occurred. But this assumes privacy is only about location, when Floridi's rejection of the ownership theory shows that a person's face and home remain constitutive of their identity regardless of where they are photographed. Someone might also argue that requiring advance announcements is impractical for every product update. Yet Kant's demand to treat people as ends applies in proportion to foreseeable harm, and Street View's harms, stalking, exposure of vulnerable individuals, were entirely foreseeable, making a public announcement a reasonable, not excessive, requirement.