

Case Analysis on Privacy

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It is no secret that the implementation of Google Street View caused many questions and concerns regarding individuals' privacy. One of the main concerns that stood out in Vaidhyathan's research was people's concerns of photos being publicized of their person, such as their face and body, and their property, such as their house and deep into their driveways, without their consent. Google's cars that had the cameras attached were also set on their default setting of maximum exposure. If Google did not have this at the start, it could have prevented the intimate details of people and their lives in the photos online. One of the sentences used by Vaidhyathan to describe Google Street View at the beginning of the report was "It [Google Street View] also causes much anxiety without causing demonstrable harm.". You cannot put a price on the feeling of safety in your own home and on your property, and that's what, I feel, Google could have forgotten when considering how people would feel about this new feature. Before going through and publishing this feature Google should have considered how these photos would make the people who they were taken of feel even though Google's intentions were for street views, they continued to publish the photos with people in them. In this Case Analysis I will show that virtue ethics, roughly meaning to do the right thing in the right situation for the right reasons, shows that Google should have done more research of the areas they were photographing by being in touch with the people of that area and editing of their photos before publication by Google putting themselves in the shoes of the people who the photos were of, could have led to a better way to implement Google Street View.

Luciano Floridi's excerpt from his book *The 4th Revolution. How the Infosphere is Reshaping Human Reality.*: "Privacy: Informational Friction", shares his ideas and concepts of how Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has shaped today's version of privacy. Over the last decade, technology has dramatically changed society around the world. Not only

has technology changed how society operates but also some interpretations of laws and rights have been brought into question. The instantaneous connections that technology has brought about, from social media to cell phone communication, has brought the topic of privacy, as a law and as a right, into question in a variety of circumstances. One of the concepts Floridi mentions is that privacy is “self-constituting” meaning that it is up to us to keep our information, that we want to keep private, private. When Google decided to publish the photos of private property and of people, they ultimately went against this concept and took the decision away from that person on what information was available to the public. Floridi also mentions the comparison of the small local village and the global digital village. In the small local village, everyone knows what’s going on all the time and people know that others gossip so they are more inclined to self-regulate, or filter, what they say. However, in the global digital village, the lack of identification or anonymity, leads people to say anything they want and put any piece of information out there without knowledge of who. The ability to stay anonymous also leads others to act without their virtue ethics or moral code, there is no second thought as in “maybe I shouldn’t post this” they just act because there are no repercussions. Typically, virtue ethics focuses mainly on the morality of a person, we can turn those views and ask, what was the moral obligations of the company when they decided to go forward with Google Street View publishing photos of individual people?

Ethically speaking, one would think that Google should have thought that taking photos at the maximum default setting, to where people could see inside of people’s houses, read their license plates, or could see enough of their property to make people feel uncomfortable worried that burglars will target them, was not a good idea. In attempt to make this right, Google has stated that a person only needs to contact the company and Google will simply remove or edit

the photo, sometimes in as short of an hour time span. An hour doesn't seem like a long time to have a photo up on the internet, however, as Vaidhyathan mentions, that person who did report the photo has no way of knowing how long that photo has been there and who has seen it. Google, being a successful multi-million-dollar company at the time, should have better prepared to disclose privacy acts and information to the public. To implicate Google Street View in a more ethical way, the company should have hired a team directly responsible for going through footage from each vehicle. This team could have been lead even with an ethical question, "Would you want this photo of you or your property on the internet where millions of people could see it?", with this the team of people might have prevented some of the complaints and concerns from the public.

James Grimmelman in his publication in Widener Law Journal, "Privacy as a Product Safety" discusses common social media myths and how social media, and product safety are all factors in how privacy is overshadowed in today's digital world. While his prime example was Facebook, all of this can be said for any social media platform, including Google Streets View. The first myth he disclosed was that "Facebook users don't care about privacy" because avid users of the social media outlet, also described as the younger generation or gen Z to Florida, would 'overshare' in posts, photos, and on the internet in general. Many people see the choice of what they post and what they share are to their discretion this should not blur the lines of not wanting or caring about their privacy. In a perfect world, the choice of what people share about their personal lives is up to them and what they consider to be private should be kept private. Many concerns about Google Street View have also raised red flags in blurring the lines between what is public information, such as street names and city information, and private information such as people's faces and hair color and the car models in their driveway.

When signing up for a new account, Facebook does give the user the option to share as much information about themselves as they like, it does not require it. As many people know, when you create an account to any webpage or app, you more times than not have had to accept the 'Terms and Conditions' page before proceeding on to your new account. This page usually states that the app or website (for example: Facebook, Instagram, Gmail, Yahoo) from taking any responsibility if something were to happen to someone or their information. This has been seen as an issue to users, especially when considering personal information on the internet because it does not hold the seller of the app responsible for the damages their product did. However, Google Streets View does not have a terms and conditions for use, it is open to the public and can be accessed by anyone. Therefore, the idea of the photos and surveillance of people in their homes or on their property can still be seen as a violation of privacy to some and give people that unnecessary sense of anxiety, however nobody can be held accountable according to certain sites and their guidelines.

Grimmelmann also mentions his concept of privacy as product safety. He states, "...Facebook does have the potential to be dangerous to your privacy, we should not ban Facebook." However, many of the users on these sites are unaware of what this information is used for, like Grimmelmann explains in his journal an employer could be using social media sites to discover information about an applicant that they are not legally permitted to ask when conducting an interview. While we do not think this is happening because it would be unethical and illegal, users might be unaware of how to ensure their information is as private as possible therefore cannot stop this from happening.

In conclusion, Google could have implemented their new software, Google Street View, in a more ethical way by ensuring the photos and videos used did not violate anyone's sense of privacy. The people and companies who do use google street view as a tool to help their everyday lives, love this feature and say that it has helped them in so many ways. Google Street View is a great tool for travelers, construction workers, property investors and so many more people. Going off what Grimmelmann said, we should not ban it for the sake of privacy protection but rather, Google, should take more steps in implementing privacy for the people they have and are affecting. Virtue ethics focuses on being a good person when nobody is looking, if Google would have focused on putting themselves in the shoes of the people who feel their privacy is violated or has the potential to be violated, the launch of Google Street View could have been seen in a more positive creation to some. As much as it is unrealistic to expect every single person will be happy with Google Street View, there are steps that Google has taken to make people feel more comfortable. Any damages or issues caused by Google has been attempted to be fixed by the company and they continue to update their privacy policies and procedures. Throughout the years since Google Street View's initial launch, Google has updated many of the ways they take photos and what they sensor out on their site, such as license plate numbers. Technology is still progressing every day and we should enjoy all the wonderful opportunities that will follow, while continuing to ensure the correct steps are taken to protect the privacy and safety, to the fullest extent possible, for all users.

References:

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