

Case Study 2 – Citizenfour

PHILL 355E

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Introduction

In this paper, I will be applying my knowledge of Utilitarian Ethics to Edward Snowden from the movie Citizenfour (2014). Snowden was a government contractor that discovered that the NSA was spying on American citizens by collecting massive amounts of data. His dilemma fairly straightforward between staying silent to protect national security and American interests or speak out and expose to the public that the government is violating people's privacy. From a Utilitarian standpoint I will be arguing that Snowden made an ethical point by releasing this information to the public. His decision created a longer term overall positive situation than harm as this made the public more aware and educated about digital privacy. This paper will take a deep dive on Utilitarian ethics, Snowden's dilemma, and show why and how his actions are morally justified.

Utilitarian Ethics

Utilitarianism is built on a foundation that the right thing is do ultimately creates the most overall happiness and causes the least amount of harm. Developed by Jeremy Benthan and Stuart Mill, who based firmly believed that moral decisions should be based off outcomes verses rules or feelings. Benthan focused on the aspect that the amount of happiness actions can create while Mill's focus was adding in the quality of happiness also mattered. To put it into perspective for this theory, if an action helps more people than hurts then that is the morally correct. Although the issue that arises is that Utilitarian can also justify grey zone actions. Snowden's case isn't perfect as with the complexity of the matter there are a lot of variables.

Edward's Ethical Dilemma

In the Citizenfour (2014) movie we learn that Snowden finds out about the NSA running a global surveillance system that collects data from everyday people. Project PRISM was used at the interest of the United States government, and the argument for that side is data collecting keeps the public safe. Snowden believes the right thing to do is leak to the public because he feels responsible for this system. This is a slippery slope because if he stays quiet the guilt will continue to build, and the power of the government will continue to grow unchecked. On the other hand, if he leaks and it gets traced back to him his normal life will never be the same again. He will be as an enemy to the United States government and may lose possessions like his car, house, and even pose a threat to his family. His dilemma is more just breaking a federal contract, but rather does he value his safety over the rights of the public.

Applying Utilitarian Ethics

Looking at Snowden's decision from a Utilitarian point of view we can conclude that morally leaking this information provided more benefits than harm to society. The general public understand how fragile their data can really be and how governments could easily take this data away. This broke compliances and regulations such as HIPAA and the CIA Triad. Snowden's actions sparked what would be the long struggle between individuals wanting autonomy and privacy rights verses governments and corporations. Today this still lingers on especially with artificial intelligence boom. These leaks caused a large tension between Snowden and the United States government which lead Snowden to be charged

with espionage. In response to this he fled to Russia where he currently lives today. He knows leaking this was very dangerous and changed the course of this life forever, but he also knew he had to otherwise the United States government would keep operating this surveillance program in the shadows. Tying this back in government spying on everyone is dystopian and can limit people's happiness if the power is used wrongfully. Everyone is equal; everyone is entitled equal protection and privacy.

Resolution

Further in Utilitarian ethics, Snowden did the right thing because his choice ultimately maximized happiness and minimized harm by advocating for public awareness and individual freedom. Even though he faced heavy backlash it helped to get the ball rolling on digital protections and privacy discussions. Utilitarianism would say that sacrificing himself for the greater good of millions of people was the correct thing to do. Snowden's personal loss was outweighed by his actions for the collective good. Today Snowden still currently lives in Russia and is not allowed to return to the United States. To the government he has violated the Espionage Act and would face serious consequences returning home.

Conclusion

In the end, Edward Snowden's decision shown in the Citizenfour showed that he acted for the greater good. His ethical dilemma was more than just about rules or loyalty, but the consequences. By leaking the NSA's programs on surveillance, he forced the government to change and reevaluate how privacy and security should coexist. Through the

lends of a utilitarian standpoint his choice was the most ethical because he ended helping more people than it harmed. So, his decision of morally correct according to this theory.