A More Ethical Implementation of Google Street View: A Utilitarian Perspective

By Nicholas Dorsey

Google Street View has long sparked debate over privacy and public data. In Siva Vaidhyanathan's *Googlization Of Us*, Vaidhyanathan argues that it invades personal space, normalizes surveillance, and contributes to corporate overreach. Vaidhyanathan provides examples and recollections of peers and their feelings of Google Street View as well as other countries and their population's reception on the implementation of Google Street View. Some citizens both domestic and abroad argue that Google catches personal identifiable images as well as inappropriate. These images can be reported and removed after review, but on the downside, they are exposed for an unregulated amount of time before removal. Also, after the implementation and protest, the complaints and uneasiness towards Google Street View dies down as people become accustomed and find the next trending topic to complain about as many do in the Information Age. On the other hand, many professionals and peers found Google Street View to be extremely beneficial. From architects being able to stroll the streets remotely to view easements, setbacks, and infrastructure remotely, an author being able to view old neighborhoods and literally stroll down memory lane to help recollect memories to pen his story, and potential homebuyers looking at neighborhoods and getting an idea of safety and convenience, Google Street View had an abundance of value, just poor ethical inclusion for users and citizens. In this Case Analysis, I will argue that from a utilitarian point of view, its societal benefits do not outweigh these costs and encroachment on privacy. Ethically, had Google performed a better rollout with the populus and local officials, I believe it would have had less pushback and been received better. Nonetheless, when implemented with better design choices, Google Street View serves the greater good.

In Richard Floridi's "Privacy: Informational Friction", Floridi introduces the concept of "privacy friction" to highlight how digital platforms often reduce friction and privacy to increase convenience, while neglecting ethical responsibility. Floridi also touches on how technology can give more accessibility to each member of society and ultimately decreasing the informational gap between its members, and he also makes a great point that certain aspects of privacy hold more weight to people of different upbringings and cultures.

One example provided by Floridi is an account of a journalist hiring a private investigator in 1999 to obtain as much information about him that he could with just his first and last name only, no intrusive tools, hacking, or speaking with known family of friends. With just that information the PI was able to obtain information on the journalists finances, home, address, phone number, significant other, employers, and family. If someone was able to find this info in 1999, the same and more can be found from a simple Google search at the time of Vaidhyanathan's publishing. It's the ethical invasion of privacy and lack of consent that caused outrage, not decrease in accessibility.

As these concepts and points relate to Google Street View, the informational gap is decreased by providing more accessibility and availability, but it also levels the playing field for everyone in the infosphere. Floridi also made a very valid point that in one culture a messy garden may bring shame, and in another household, it may be perfectly normal to have multiple people living in a cluttered living room without shame. This can be related to Vaidhyanathan's observation and account on the contrasting differences between the UK's culture with cameras and privacy vs Japan's where a street is an extension of their home and personal property. As Floridi stated, a community or population will ultimately adjust to the informational friction and availability of privacy in their environment and adapt as humans do. Had Google Street View given public notice, from a perspective of the last statement, with being aware that Google Street View would be present, people could avoid being in public view performing activities or in a state they do not wish to be seen in.

To be more ethical and receptive to the public though, Google could have implemented tools that give citizens control by including and or introducing opt-out to have address or identifiable information displayed, delay mechanisms for publishing new imagery, or tiered image resolutions) allowing enhanced privacy without eliminating utility. They also could have given notification when they would be recording imagery in specific areas so that the population of said area could prepare if needed or be aware to be orderly on the set date. This form of ethical design doesn't oppose innovation—it supports sustainable, inclusive access to technology. Google could have also sent out representatives to observe the culture and sit with officials to figure the lay of the land and non-negotiables to assess the climate of the area for a less controversial rollout region to region.

James Grimmelmann offers another valuable perspective and framework for assessing Google's Street View rollout and implementation. Grimmelmann emphasizes the idea of "privacy as product safety," which fits directly with the utilitarian ethic. Grimmelman stresses that companies offering platforms, software, and data as a product should be held to the same standards as companies producing physical products. Just as a product must be tested for potential harm before hitting the market, so should digital systems be examined for their impact on user well-being. When a toaster is produced and sold in stores and that toaster series has a malfunction and constantly bursts into flames, we blame the manufacturer.

Google's Street View rollout exemplifies what Grimmelman would likely consider a "dangerous product". The decision to deploy image capturing vehicles around the globe without extensive testing and public feedback is ethically wrong. Asking users to report images that they are not satisfied with or opting out of exposure after the images have been posted on the internet of things is likened to fixing a defective seatbelt after the crash. If Street View is seen as a public-facing product, then its privacy risks aren't just side effects—they're defects and design flaws and should be revised like a defective vehicle would be recalled. Applying product safety logic, Google would be obligated to redesign Street View in ways that reduce preventable harm. Tools like automated blurring, user removal forms, and neighborhood-level privacy controls are not optional—they're ethical necessities under this view.

From a utilitarian analysis, the safety-first approach would have produced a more ethical and perhaps receptive outcome. Ethical audits, image review, and real-time community feedback are a few tools that could have been implemented as well to show that privacy risk and harm is being treated just as serious as a physical risk. Again, this would not have stopped innovation to support the utilitarian approach. The rollout was an ethical failure, and the benefits do not justify the scale and unpredictability of privacy risks in its initial release. Had Google acted in the sense

of rolling out a physical product ,using this framework they could have had public trust and approval all while keeping the utility and purpose of the platform intact with no delays or disruptions in performance and data collection.

Bottom line Google recorded imagery unbeknownst to people recording home numbers, license plates, individual identifiable properties, and even indecent exposures of children. These images could be up for ages before being noticed and even when noticed, they are not removed immediately. This is the equivalent of blatant disregard of known malfunctions in a product and continuing the rollout with no notification to the public. Although Google Street View gives immense value, this counteracts the utilitarianism that it offers.

Grimmelman's comparison really gives a great comparison and perspective on how privacy, although somewhat abstract in the physical sense, should be likened to a physical product that one can wrap their mind around and see to contrast and liken the severity of product safety and ethical compliance.

In the end when all is said and done, the ethical answer is not to cancel Google Street View and discourage innovation in the age of information and technology, but it is to upgrade it and make sure that its use and data provides the public with an outstanding product that adds immense value without compromising ethics and privacy and aligning with public interest over self-interest. From a utilitarian perspective, keeping what helps most people while softening harm is the right path. With better design, communication, intentional privacy friction, and stronger safety standards, Google can deliver the greatest good for the greatest number.