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Case Analysis #1 - Privacy

This paper examines the ethical issues surrounding Google's imaging practices, discussed in Siva Vaidhyanathan's "*The Googlization of Everything*". Despite Google's promise to create positive outcomes for society, there have been instances where individuals have faced privacy infringements. Siva Vaidhyanathan's "*The Googlization of Everything*" highlights the backlash faced by Google due to its privacy-infringing imaging practices. While Google Street View has delivered on some of its positive promises like allowing people to view potential homes or pinpoint landmarks; there have also been negatives to arise such as having your license plate unblurred or your personal life displayed when in the comfort of your own property. In this Case Analysis I will discuss how the Utilitarian Consequentialist analysis highlights how Google should have prioritized issuing notices to affected individuals about its imaging intentions and implement more practices for upholding the privacy within the data presented.

In Luciano Floridi’s *Privacy: Informational Friction* some of the central concepts he touched on in regard to the concerns surrounding Google and its Street View application are: “Ontological Friction” and “Informational Identity”. Ontological Friction is explained as resistance or difficulties encountered in the flow of information, which he implies as being almost necessary. According to Floridi, the transfer of information digitally is becoming more frictionless allowing for an easier flow, although beneficial in many ways, creates an uneven distribution of information and raises implications for privacy. With the flow of information being easier it creates an abundance of information readily available for misuse. With a platform such as Google, it is irresponsible for data to be so easily distributed considering the number of clicks and interactions an application like Google Street View receives. Because distribution is not easy, implications have arisen, and the company has received this backlash. Naturally, this can create new depths to a digital divide while also changing the pretenses of how our privacy is handled. The second concept explained by Floridi was Informational Identity. Informational Identity in the digital age does not only highlight physical identity but also personal information, stories, search results, documents, phone numbers, addresses, and more. Floridi explores how this concept of how informational identity can erode personal privacy. Such information if gotten ahold of by the wrong person(s) could potentially cause serious harm.

Both the central concepts discussed in Floridi’s piece should have been factors that were clearly implemented in the creation of Google’s design plan. It could be argued that even with society’s familiarity with this sort of technology we are still not quite adapted to the rapid flow of information. Many would likely be inclined to companies implementing Ontological Friction; however, Google has openly contributed directly to slowing Ontological Friction. Google has openly disregarded the importance of maintaining the privacy of Informational identity, as it too can lead to becoming a victim of a crime or unethical behavior. Utilitarian Consequentialism suggests that Google should have considered public views on ontological friction and informational identity when deciding to extensively image public spaces. When comparing the Utilitarian Consequential view, one must admit that Google’s main objective should have been to encourage the greatest good while simultaneously limiting the potential for danger or exposure as much as possible. When Google decided to extensively publish images of public space and not filter images due to their invasiveness the basis of judgment in favor of the ‘wrongness’ of the act.

In the second piece of writing, we look at Grimmelmann and his in-depth definition of privacy by emphasizing the importance of defining privacy within society. Privacy should be understood as the opposite of the public sphere, where certain information is not intended for widespread sharing. This distinction creates two distinct spheres for information, those of which they should permanently remain unless explicitly consented to leave that ‘sphere’. One of Grimmelmann’s main concepts was ‘Privacy as a product of safety’ the theory of the true definition of privacy itself. Grimmelmann chooses to dive into the specifications and guidelines for upholding privacy and what that looks like. First and foremost, privacy is to be widely accepted as the opposite of public, very black, and white. Information that is public and information meant to remain confidential should remain two separate entities and not be combined.

Another central concept by Grimmelmann is Contextual privacy. He compares privacy to secrecy to the extent that sometimes we as humans share with others information, we normally keep secret. When you are dating or meeting someone for the first time you tend to exchange pieces of your informational identity. Privacy is so important because it is linked to feelings of safety, security, trust, etc. Contextual Privacy plays a crucial part in how our society functions. Privacy holds weight in most social settings and there are implicit (unspoken) rules on privacy depending on your settings. For example, there are certain things you just do not share in a work setting in comparison to friends or a stranger you met at the coffee shop you frequent. These rules and understandings help define social contexts that help decipher what is appropriate or inappropriate. the term refers to the implicit rules and norms governing privacy within specific settings. Breaching these rules by decontextualizing information raises concerns. Google should have respected society's widely held beliefs about privacy and abided by contextual privacy principles when implementing its imaging services.

Utilitarian Consequentialism and Google's actions should be to create the greatest good for most individuals while minimizing harm. Google could have balanced public benefits with individual privacy concerns by selectively imaging widely publicized areas such as government facilities and historic landmarks. Ethical implementation of Google Street View Google should have prioritized protecting user privacy over personal ambitions. Consideration of limitations and parameters that respect contextual boundaries would align Google's actions with Utilitarian Consequentialist thinking. For a corporation such as Google, prioritizing user privacy over personal ambitions would be ideal considering the importance of maintaining mutual relationships between users and the companies is reliant on their reputation. A Utilitarian Consequentialist would argue on behalf of the users that fracturing the trust of users, can prove to be critical to the relationships companies create.

In conclusion, I stand by my belief that Google should have likely pursued a more ethically sound approach in implementing Google Street View. Google ought to selflessly put its users first, by prioritizing user privacy and considering boundaries within the context of the situation. If the launching of the application was done with the care of users in mind, through the perspective of a Utilitarian Consequentialist, Google could have minimized harm caused while maximizing societal benefits to users. Adhering to Utilitarian Consequentialism would enable Google to align its actions with the greater good and ensure the ethical implementation of technological advancements; rather than irresponsibly subjecting others to the immoral intent of others.