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Ethics – Herzfeld

Essay 1 – Surveillance

09/26/13

We are in the age of Big Data, an age where technology has become an integral part of our lives, gathering data on where we have been, what we’re doing, and sharing more about our personal lives than most of us begin to realize. Only naturally, one should be able to easily realize that with all of this, many will look to gather as much that data as they can, either for a market advantage, or to keep track of everyone’s online and offline actions. Surveillance on a global scale has become the byproduct of greater computational and the increase of easily accessible public and private information, and it’s being driven by governmental organizations, and in particular, the National Security Agency (NSA). Emails, phone conversations, locations, internet activity; almost everything we do, what we once used to think was private, is now being scooped into massive data collections, and analyzed in the name of national security. It is this massive and illegitimate surveillance that not only harms our private rights and freedoms, it actually harms our personal morality, the morality of a society as a whole, and the underlying trust that supports our society.

Obviously a society needs some sort of policing in state to insure social order, but the level that the NSA operates is not only breaking many of our personal liberties and constitutional rights, it also undermines the system of moral development that we all take place in. Kohlberg argues that every human being grows on a scale of morality, which starts at level one and two where people make decisions that based on the fear of punishment and the want for reward, to level 3 and 4 where they make decisions based upon the underlying norms of society, to level 5 and 6 where they adopt ideas of what should be moral within a society. (Crain) However, when an individual begins to worry about who is watching them when they are partaking in certain actions, rather than thinking about the morality of that action, they no longer are working towards moving up Kohlberg’s development scale. Emrys Westacott, in his article, examines how this idea is more than reasonable, and that this stagnation of development is “irresistibly spreading everywhere, percolating into the nooks and crannies of everyday existence, which is where much of a person’s moral education occurs.” (Westacott) Furthermore, taking Sandel’s description of the libertarian moral system, if freedom to pursue our endeavors without our every action being watched no longer exists, then it is not absurd in saying that moral development will be staggered because of it. In short, we no longer work towards entering those higher stages of moral development, but rather become fearful of punishment by our government, and no longer act on what is morally right, but rather what is accepted by under those in power.

Naturally, when people begin making decisions based upon what will not produce harmful consequences by those in power, rather than what is morally right, society begins to morally deteriorate. Such is the case in Britain, where in London there is approximately “4.2 million CCTV cameras… about one for every 14 people.” (Britain) It is these cameras that, as the ACLU proclaims, brings “subtle but profound changes to the character of our public places,” and thus, the people in those places. (ACLU) If we, as people of a society, can no longer take place in honest and open exchanges of ideas and actions, then we cannot expect to make moral decisions if it is against the wishes of the herd. In sum, society begins to accept the actions and decisions of those in power, whether they are ethical decisions or not, as moral development of the individual is restricted and the fear of persecution for actions in public places becomes a legitimate concern of the people.

Technology has, as we all know, made many leaps and bounds forward in the last few years, so much so that organizations like the NSA has begun the mass collection of data, and have even gone as far as breaking the underlying trust of the internet. Glenn Greenwald of *The Guardian*, recently revealed that “US and British intelligence agencies have successfully cracked much of the online encryption relied upon by hundreds of millions of people to protect personal data, online transactions, and emails.” In particular, they broke the “Secure Socket Layer (SSL)” and “HTTPS,” which uses advanced cryptography to deliver packets across the internet. (Greenwald) With the internet’s gates of privacy almost blown wide open, people can no longer rely on the security of their transmissions, and thus the underlying trust within a society is broken. In the end, we, as users of the internet, can no longer trust the authenticity of our communications, and must now worry about abuses of power by those holding the key to decrypting everything we do within the walls of the internet. Security and privacy have little existence now within those walls, and because of it, little trust can no longer be found.

If we are to support the moral development of our people within society, we need to strike some sort of balance between personal liberty, and the benefits that surveillance can provide. Too much surveillance leads to a lack of moral development both by the individuals of a society, and by the society as a whole. As Westacott proclaims, one of the goals of our society should be to “cultivate a conscience” for right and wrong, and “as surveillance becomes increasingly ubiquitous, the chances are reduced that conscience will ever by anything more than the little voice inside telling us that someone, somewhere, may be watching.” (Westacott) Moral rights and wrong will be no more, and what is accepted under those in power become the law of the land.

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