

Privacy Precedes Caution

Debating contentious issues surrounding ethics and technology can be likened to playing a game of “would you rather.” That is, any remedy to the most pressing issues presented in the realm of technology is just a matter of settling the lesser of two evils. Nobody really wins. This has been the case when considering the ethical implications of allowing data collection by the government and private technology corporations. Yes, it is sometimes true that surveilling citizens to no end via their favorite online platforms may reduce or solve real-world crimes; but this neglects a larger ethical concern about the role of big-tech and the government in our lives.

The common person has reason to support both sides of the issue; ultimately, it is a vie between individual privacy and pre-emptive public safety measures. However, inherent to the principles of a democratic nation is the prioritization of the individual over the collective society. Our culture has understood that often by prioritizing the rights of the individual, the greater good for society prevails. By extension, the same should be true for internet privacy. Individual rights to privacy on online platforms—that is, having the right to communicate and express with anonymity—supersedes the investigation of possible crimes by breaching personal data.

Regardless of how our culture may justify individual liberties over the collectivist good, private entities should not be granted the power to play a significant role in the enforcement of the law. By employing the use of data and resources harbored by private technology corporations, the government is essentially lobbying a third-party source—filled with varied interests—to do their job. Additionally, these corporations do not necessarily share the same interests as the government; that is a simple consequence of them being a private business with their own separate motives. The government is entrusting the information that these corporations provide in the interest of directly prosecuting and convicting American citizens. That makes this

a much larger issue, expanding beyond privacy concerns to the redefined role and power that big-tech has.

Power is the issue at large that should put any indecision on this matter to rest. It is one thing to employ the information supplied by non-vetted for-profit companies in the enforcement of federal law, but it is another issue (and perhaps a larger one) to grant the government an unprecedented amount of control over our lives. Prior to the age of technology, privacy concerns were often minimal and seldom a point of contention; the government lacked the means to invade upon the privacy of individuals in a manner that would go unnoticed. That is no longer the case today. Now, the government has undisputed access to our lives and private interactions through our devices and technology pathways. The internet created an opportunity for the government to take a closer look at its citizens; but just because that opportunity exists, does not mean that it has merit. It may seem like a small thing at first; but granting the government more and more access into our private lives may make the boundaries and rights between private and non-private information more ambiguous. If we rationalize the government stripping away internet privacy rights out of special interests, we also pave the way for the government to take away other valuable privacy rights by establishing precedence.

Ultimately, the lesser evil entails ridding government intrusion on personal data and communications online. In a way, nothing adversely changes with respect to the course of this nation in the past. Just like the days before technology, people live freely without big brother watching closely and the government works independently to help serve the needs of the people.