Keith DeSantis

CS3043 Social Implications

Individual Presentation Script

Hello! My presentation today is on the ethics of internet-based organization’s collection of user data. We’ll be inspecting this process through a study of Facebook’s history and practices of data collection, and near the end of the presentation we’ll expand the topic to beyond this “case study” of sorts, and try to apply what we deduce to the greater internet-centric social world we live in.

NEXT SLIDE

So, when it comes to Facebook, it may surprise some of you, as it did me, to learn that Facebook collects data both from users and non-users alike. CLICK. Facebook has gigabytes of data saved for each user, including but not limited to post content, interactions (usually in the form of comments, tags, and direct messages), connections in the form of prior interactions and friend lists, and locations given with posts. This data is used by Facebook’s algorithms to personalize your feed, showing you content that you are likely to agree with or enjoy, and more importantly, advertising products the algorithm believes you are likely to purchase.

This all seems pretty par for the course, but Facebook also collects and analyzes data on non-users. CLICK. This is done passively through user’s posting information on non-users, such as posting location-based pictures with other non-users, and it is done actively through the collection of cookies, which will be discussed later.

Beyond this, Facebook also collected facial recognition data on users. CLICK. They stopped collecting this data in the EU in 2012 when the Hamburg data protection commissioner objected to the lack of explicit consent given by users who were having their faces scanned (often unknowingly) [1].

We will analyze these two cases, collecting data on users and on non-users separately.

NEXT SLIDE

Concerning users, Facebook and other companies avoid legal trouble by describing their intentions to collect data in their Terms and Conditions contract that every user must electronically sign before having access to an account. CLICK. These Terms and Conditions, for the most part, keep the company’s actions in the clear legally, CLICK but not necessarily ethically. CLICK. The Terms and Conditions are often filled with dense legalese and can span hundreds of pages worth of writing. Most users simply agree without reading through the entirety of the contract. While they do technically have a responsibility to read through anything they intend to sign, the sheer effort that would have to go into reading every contract for the many internet accounts that seem necessary for modern life, it feels like an unrealistic expectation. So, the question then becomes is it ethical for Facebook and other companies to effectively “hide” these agreements to personal data collection in their Terms and Conditions? CLICK. We will address this as well, but first let’s finish getting a full context on the data collection of non-users.

NEXT SLIDE

While Facebook has significantly less access to data of non-users, they still track their activity through the use of “cookies.” “A computer “cookie” is more formally known as an HTTP cookie, a web cookie, an Internet cookie or a browser cookie. The name is a shorter version of “magic cookie,” which is a term for a packet of data that a computer receives and then sends back without changing or altering it… track of your visits and activity [2].” By collecting this data Facebook maintains profiles on non-users as well as users. CLICK. When asked about this practice, “Mr. Zuckerberg said Facebook tracked nonusers for security purposes — to ensure they could not scrape public data about Facebook users [3].”

NEXT SLIDE

Now that we have a better context for what data Facebooks collects from who and how they go about it, let’s analyze their actions through a few different ethical theories. We will be taking a look at CLICK Kantianism, CLICK Act Utilitarianism, CLICK and Social Contract Theory. CLICK. Under Kantianism Facebook (and many similar companies’) actions seem deceitful in how they present their intentions. They are effectively using the users who agree to the lengthy Terms and Conditions as a means to the end of gaining profits from advertisers and increasing their database of information, CLICK making their actions not ethical. CLICK. Under Act Utilitarianism we see profits for the company increase, therefore happiness of company employees increase, and a happiness increase in the content-targeted users, as they are exposed to advertisements and content that is cherry-picked to make them enjoy the site and make them want to spend more time on it. On the other hand however, the mass collection and storage of data by one entity has a large risk associated with it. CLICK If the company were to ever decide to sell data to nefarious sources for profit, or if there were a large scale data breach in their system it would cause unhappiness and possibly even pain on a large scale. Thus under Act Utilitarianism their actions could possibly be justified or not, based on where you place importance and how you view risk in ethical analysis. CLICK. Finally under Social Contract Theory, you have quite literally signed a contract and entered into a social agreement with the administration of the company to give them your data, therefore the company has done nothing wrong. Here, however is where things become a bit more interesting, as CLICK many might argue the hypothetical “social contract of the internet” is still being written.

NEXT SLIDE

What is meant by this is that while the Internet may feel like it has been an integral part of society for a long time (especially to our generation), nothing has become so deeply incorporated into humanity’s existence as quickly as the Internet. This figure gives a nice representation of the exponential growth of technology over time, and as you can see we are developing higher level tech at an exploding rate, taking tens of thousands of years to arrive at the rudimentary light bulb, then only 90 years later a man landed on the moon. All this is to say that the Internet burst onto the scene and was adopted by the masses incredibly quickly, and had an immense impact on how we live our lives relative to other inventions in human history, so much so that in some ways we are still struggling to “catch up” and change our ethics and laws to work better with the post-internet world.

NEXT SLIDE

Understanding the legal, ethical, and historical context of internet titans like Google and Facebook are quintessential to being an informed user of the internet, so I wanted to leave you with these questions to think about when you come back to this topic, CLICK At what point does a company become so vital to everyday life that is must legally be treated in a different manner.  Is there such point? and CLICK Are the use of Terms & Conditions as they are currently implemented ethical?

NEXT SLIDE

Here are my references, thank you all for your time, I’ll take any questions and try to answer them as best I can.

NEXT SLIDE