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Spyware is type of software designed to covertly monitor device activity, often without the user's consent. Primarily marketed for parental control due to its ability to track locations, read texts, and log calls, spyware can also be misused for surveillance in abusive relationships. ([Vox](#)) This dual-use nature highlights its potential for both protection and harm. This essay examines the spyware developers' unethical practices through the lens of deontological ethics, focusing on companies like LetMeSpy and ClevGuard. It critiques their practices, suggests potential improvements, and explores the existing policy vacuums and conceptual muddles in the surveillance industry.

Deontological ethics judges actions based on one's intent to fulfill duty to others, emphasizing 'good will' as defined by Immanuel Kant. [Wiki](#) Generally, violating individual autonomy, such as collecting private data without consent, is considered immoral. Spyware developers, such as those at FlexiSpy who market their apps for spying on partners, clearly act with malicious intent. [Course Website](#) This violates autonomy and neglects the potential harms, such as enabling an abusive partner to stalk their spouse, such as attending a relationship counseling session. [Vox](#) Even developers with good intentions, like creating apps for parents to monitor children with consent, fail ethically if they do not prevent misuse. In both scenarios, whether through harmful intent or negligence in safeguarding against abuse, developers act unethically. Most fall into one of these categories according to the media [Vox](#) reflecting a widespread issue in the industry.

Current companies, like HelloSpy and ClevGuard, shows no signs in preventing such misuse. HelloSpy directly advertised on the idea of spying your spouse to catch cheating, while ClevGuard is pretended to be a parental control application on Google Play, but has article on their website showing 'how to track my girlfriend's Android' [Clevguard](#). Moreover, most of these companies do not assist the victim [Vox](#), and some even replies when the journalist asking for help on using the app for spying. From a technical point of view, such surveillance software could certainly be improved. In Android or iOS, the application could show a constant notification alerting the user that they are be monitored. Further, These apps should also display their icons openly,r, and they should user informative names and icons like 'Parent Monitor App' with a surveillance camera icon. The app should also facilitate user to remove it if installed unknowingly.

Currently, there is an *policy vacuum*, a situation where there are no explicit laws to cope with a new technology, in such industry. Advertising as a ‘parental control’ app, these company could argue it as a product for parent to better monitor and protect their children with their consent, as an excuse to prevent the legal consequence from the actual illegal spying behavior. This is one showcase *conceptual muddles*, where there are two possible use cases, either for parental control, or for spying in an abusive relationship.

As a computer scientist, I am aware of the public implication of creation and misuse of such application developed by these companies. However, I don’t think the company will have to much negative impact on my profession. As there are unethical developer making questioning apps, there are also technical experts who actively seeks solution to detect such spyware and prevent the misuse cases from happening.

References

Vox, Nicki Dell, Karen Levy, Damon McCoy, and Thomas Ristenpart, How domestic abusers use smartphones to spy on their partners

Wiki, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deontology>

ClevGuard, <https://www.clevguard.com/track/track-my-girlfriends-phone-without-her-knowing-for-free/>

Course Webiste <https://canvas.illinois.edu/courses/47951/assignments/997816>