Seminar 2: TED Talk on how Smartphones are now a Civil Rights Issue

*By: Gabriel Stroe*

TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) is an American conference that is focused on having a speaker discuss new ideas, scientific discoveries and technological advancements. Normally I find them rather intriguing and very informative, but occasionally I find a TED Talk (as the presentation is referred to) to be quite misleading and lacking quite a few important details to give context to the discussion. Now this could be for a number of reasons, maybe the presenter is not aware of that there is something in which an audience needs for context, or maybe there are just trying to convince the audience to take a certain position and some context elements go against that position. Regardless of the reason, I feel that it is important to outline some of these contextual points as that allows the audience to formulate more informed opinions.

Recently I saw this TED Talk titled: “Your smartphone is a civil rights issue” by Christopher Soghoian. The TED Talk presents a claim that due to Apple enable encryption on their IPhone by default, and Google not enabling it on their Android Phones by default, those who have more wealth have better protection from malware and government surveillance. His main argument for this conclusion is the average IPhone user has a higher income then the average Android user, and because of this those with higher income are better protected from malware and government surveillance. After watching the TED Talk, I started looking into the topic. I found a few bits of information that really bring extra context on the matter.

First some context that supports Soghoian’s position: In his presentation, Soghoian askes the audience to think of the typical IPhones, he then describes his vision of the typical I phone user as a wealthy well dress white male. This was to assert his point that those who are wealthy can afford IPhones and receive the benefit of having encryption enabled by default. What’s interesting is he never actually brought up any studies to support this claim. So after some personal investigating I found a study performed by the Pew Research Group in 2013. It showed ownership of does IPhones increase as a person’s income increases and that an ownership of Android Phones all increases with those who have lower incomes (Nanji). The study even supports a claim he makes later on in the presentation that this affects African American Citizen’s more than White Americans (something Soghoian deduced with the knowledge that African Americans on average have lower incomes). I found it most interesting that he did not include this study, and why he simply painted a picture of the average IPhone user to his audience. The data supports and strengthens his argument, there is no reason that I can see not to use it for evidence to Soghoian’s claim.

Now all that being said there are a few issues pieces of information that are not present or simply overlooked in his own statements. Firstly, on most android devices this is simple disabled by default and can be easily enabled from the settings menu. In addition this feature has been around since the early Android days of Version 2.1 (Cunningham). The difference really whether a user has to opt in or opt out, the service is generally available for buy types of Operating Sytems. Soghoian did specify that it wasn’t enabled by default, but that point seems underemphasized which really makes the issue seem more significant then it actually is.

The next piece of context that Soghoian is missing is that there is a very reasonable reason why this feature isn’t enabled by default. Unlike IPhones which are all made in house by apple with very few variants and very small differences in price, Android phones have several different OEMs that produce the physical aspect of the phone and then use the Android OS on top of the phone they just manufactured. Due to this, there are a vast variety of variants with different hardware features and prices. Many of the OEMs who create extremely affordable Android phones often skip on hardware features that would increase the cost of the phone like for example hardware level encryption (Cunningham). In addition, since encryption done through software because there is no hardware level encryption is extremely demanding on a systems resources, the extremely low cost android phones probably would not want to use this feature (Cunningham). That’s just the extremely cheap phones as well, midrange Android phones includes have this feature as an option (Cunningham). So the reason google doesn’t implement this is not due to supporting government surveillance or malware, but so that their Operating system can be used on a multiple phones of different price ranges.

Context is really important when trying to understand the truth of a situation. It’s important when sharing a topic of discussion to use evidence and data as supporting context to the issue at hand. In the comments of this TED Talk many people found and believe that this was just simply Google allowing the government to spy on their users and Soghoian argument made it seem that way, but the evidence does not support this.

References

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