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**Summary**

With social media becoming more than just mainstream, it is natural for unique problems to arise as it is used by more and more people. One issue that is currently surfacing is that of the use of real-time social media surveillance with subscription-based software (CBC News). There is a various number of reasons why this is an issue, the American Civil Liberties Union has stated that the software used by police—Geofeedia— “can be easily used to collect information on peaceful protesters or target certain groups” and it “can be used as a valuable public safety tool if used transparently (CBC News). One example of a police department using this software is the Denver Police Department (DPD) using Geofeedia to monitor social media sites during large events (CBC News). DPD is reported to have spent $30,000 for one year of Geofeedia’s software and services (CBC News). A Lieutenant of the DPD cites the ability to “see real-time potential threats being made to an event” in addition to identifying “criminal suspects and their actions as they post to social media” as justification for implementing this use of arguably invasive software (CBC News). It is unknown how many police departments are actually employing these strategies nationwide but at least 500 agencies in L.A. have received grants for using Geofeedia’s software (CBC News). News organizations, retailers, and companies also implement similar strategies with the software (CBC News). The invasive nature of this software being deployed without any transparency on behalf of the institution deploying it has led activists to voice how Geofeedia “markets itself as a way to target protestors” and that it is “a deterrent to free speech” (CBC News).

**Analysis***.*

Clearly, there is no question of the efficacy of this software. As it is employed by multiple police departments and private companies at a considerable rate. Further, these agencies advocate for the software because of its insightfulness with civil disobedience and protests. However, the lack of transparency on behalf of the agencies deploying these tactics is alarming. I will present the ethical implications of this software in junction with the threat it poses to personal and group rights to emphasize the need for operational transparency. Based on this premise it will become clear that without operational transparency, this software is to be avoided at all costs; even with transparency, this software is to be treated with the highest levels of scrutiny until proper checks and balances can be integrated.

Social media tracking software presents a number of ethical implications. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, “the software can be easily used to collect information on peaceful protestors or target certain groups” (CBC News). Additionally, they say that “the [DPD] could be gathering intelligence on law abiding demonstrators” when “the department agreed in 2003 to stop collecting information on protestors not suspected of crimes” (CBC News). The Fair Information Principles are an authoritative set of principles and reasonable ethical guidelines for protecting personal data (Adaji 12). According to the guidelines and in order to use social media tracking software ethically, one should:

* Inform people when you collect their information, what you collect and how it is used
* Collect only needed data
* Offer an opt out option
* Keep data only as long as is needed
* Keep data accurate; provide means of people to verify and correct their Data
* Secure people’s data from theft, accidental leaks
* Create policies for responding to law enforcement requests for data (Adaji Slide 12).

Based on the Fair Information Principles, and without “a clear law enforcement purpose”, the use of social media tracking software is at least morally questionable.

The ethical implications of using Geofeedia without transparency indicate that using it irresponsibly could result in a serious violation of personal rights. Given that that Canadian Privacy Act provides that personal data cannot be disclosed without consent, it is obvious that using this software without subject consent is not only unethical, but illegal (Adaji Slide 20). Thus, undisclosed use of this software is a direct violation of personal rights.

Not only can police use of Geofeedia and similar social media data scanning software be a violation our individual rights, it can also result in a violation of group rights. This stems from activists who “are concerned that Geofeedia is marketing itself as a way to target protesters” (CBC News). Group rights are violated when authoritative entities target them because of their group identity. This tacks on another problem with social media tracking; in the wrong hands it can be used for oppression.

**Conclusion**

Geofeedia and software like it offer useful and insightful information. However, this information is based on private user data. Thus, the use of such software only seems to be ethical if the people the software is being used on are aware of its use and the software is being deployed according to the Fair Information Principles. Therefore, I stand against the use of software that tracks social media posts, especially when the purpose and methodology behind the use of such software is not made available to the general public.

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