PHI 334: Oct 4 – Apps and Business Ethics

Today, I want to talk about apps, both mobile and online, and the way in which this aspect of internet commerce affects you both as a user and as a potential creator. To start with, all of you are users. If you have a phone, you use an app. If you go on the internet, you use web apps. You are all users.

How many of you use free apps? Free sites?

They are not free. Fundamentally, you are trading your data in exchange for whatever it is that you are getting supposedly for free. Consider the fact that I have an app that says I do not collect any data. Click to see the store page and read the data collection terms. It says " Data Not Collected. The developer does not collect any data from this app." It says so because what I collect is not technically data, if it is used in the process of generating the services and is surrendered voluntarily, or is legally classified as meta-data, such as your phone ID, location, ip address, and so on. So, even though I collect information, I technically do not collect data, according to the law.

Let us look at the kind of information I collect. Please click here to open up the directory that contains the relevant data. All the data that you see is data that I have legally collected while at the same time saying I do not collect data, since the data I collected is not legally considered to be data. Additionally, take a look at the code, if you are technically inclined, to see the way in which information is gathered, organized, and collected. As a reminder, all of this is legal.

Now, obviously my app is not free–there are in app purchases that people buy. That given me even more data, such as their phone identification code, their precise triangulated location, the language of the user, and all sorts of data that Apple provides without even telling you. This is only relevant for Apple, since I do not make things for Android users because Android users do not buy in app purchases very often, which is simple economic data. I also usually have to ban people from using the app, usually people from Italy, Hungary, some parts of former Yugoslavia, some parts of Asia, and some parts of Africa, since they tend to abuse the coin features. I can do this because I keep very rigorous records and stop abuses as soon as I catch them.

That being said, all services that you use online can gather this data about you. It is very easy to do, and if I can do it, then do it. The reason why sites take so long to load is because they load code that tracks your clicks, your mouse movements, your time on page, all sorts of data about you, along with cookies, your internet history, everything you have done so far in the session, and so on and so forth. Nothing is free, your data is being used to market to you, to monetize you, to funnel you toward purchases and so on. This is how the internet economy works, the supposedly free services you receive are in fact an exchange, you provide your data as the payment.

The question is, how do you live a good life in light of this? I do not have an answer, frankly I am part of the problem, I suppose, but how many of you, if you made an app, would not track data? What is to be done about this if anything?