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Currently information is being saved at an unimaginable rate. Data that is being gathered today could stay around for an indeterminate amount of time, which raise some ethical concerns about how this data is handled and if it is being gathered properly. The effects of this massive collection of data presents new ethical challenge which could have unforeseeable consequences. The actions and experiences of most people on the planet are now being recorded, analyzed, and saved. With this, the privacy and consent of users has fallen by the wayside. While some of the results being derived from this wealth of information do have benefits, the results must be handled with care. It is all too easy to assume that these enormous data sets are representative of a whole population, when it is not. The major issue is whether big data can be used to benefit society and not just the powerful few.

Most modern electronic devices now are all collecting data; the extent of which is largely hidden from the user. For instance, medical records are now being arrogated and saved, drones can now constantly record over cities and smartphones are being designed to track your location, making what was once thought to be transient, permanent. The trouble arises when the companies who implement these features start gathering information from the user. Even if the user signs an agreement prior to the use of the product, is it still ethical for this data to be collected? When even our own government is spying on use, identifying what morally okay can be challenging.

Some of the information gathered from using these techniques however, can be extremally useful. Giving doctors the ability to evaluate cases at a more macro scale could give way to potential breakthroughs; finding patterns that can only be recognized using such a large sample set. Also with the use of constantly recording drones, law enforcement can find leads that could solve countless cases. With both however, there is a caveat. While this information can, and undoubtable will, be used for good, it gives the organization possessing it immense power. For big data to be ethically sound, it must not be used to manipulate people. Every human need to be treated as an end in themselves, which means they must be regarded as having intrinsic value. When the people who are analyzing the data forget that the information they are gathering and manipulating encompasses people’s lives, that’s when big data becomes immoral.

Information must be both collected and used only to the benefit of all people involved equally at all steps. For big data to be moral regard must be given to the people who contributed the data. Moral issues will arise when the data starts being taken without the consent or knowledge of the people from which the data is derived; treating a person merely as a data point and not as an end in themselves. Take the drones as an example, the constantly recording is fine if the video data gathered by a drone is only viewed retroactively and used to catch people who have committed a truly unforgivable crime. It would not be moral if the video was being monitored proactively because that would violate the privacy of the innocent, who have not committed an immoral act and therefor have not forfeited there right to privacy.

Overall, big data is a very slippery subject. On one hand the value of the insights gleaned from its analysis has the potential to be incredibly useful, but it cannot be at the expense of society. Proper measures must be taken to ensure that the intrinsic value of people as rational creatures is respected always. This may not be a feasible assertion, and in that case, big data would be considered as morally wrong. The potential big data possesses is undeniable, but its implementation must be regarded with the utmost care.