No Right to Privacy

In the past 20 years, use of computers and the internet has been rapidly growing. There are now millions of apps available, and social media platforms, ranging from Facebook, to twitter, to snapchat, just naming a few. The rise of these platforms has allowed sharing like never before, and has made the world a smaller, more connected place. You can now share photos, videos, thoughts, locations and more with anyone, in almost any part of the world. There is however, a price for all of this connection. The companies who run social media sights, or those with search engines, email, or any other feature which allows for sharing, can collect data from its customers. This is a frightening idea when it comes to peoples sense of privacy, as many of us are unaware of the extent which companies go in collecting and selling this information. Yet, the companies are able to use this information to improve their company and profits and, at the end of the day, the consumer is the one who agreed to the information being out there in the first place, though there is a growing number of ways to leave a smaller digital footprint.

Google in particular has been facing opposition on its collection of data, that is then sold to marketing partners for better advertising. Many people feel that this is a breech in their privacy, as seen in an article from the Boston Globe, as well as one found in the Huffington Post. The Boston Globe had an article, "Obama Proposes Law for Online Privacy," by Hiawatha Bray, which discusses the hopes for a new "bill of rights" (Bray) to give people more control over their data. This is due to the feeling that people need to safeguard their information from
Argument Paper

websites, like Google, who wish to scan and share that information. The article, "Lawsuit Alleges that Google has Crossed a 'Creepy Line' with Student Data," by Benjamin Herold, goes more in-depth with that Google has been doing to make people so angry. A quote in the article from Google Mail FAQs states, "For use in targeting advertising on other sites, if your email is not encrypted, software...does scan your email." (Herold) This is addressing the claims that Google goes through everyones emails, particularly students, and sells that information to marketing partners.

Which, as you can see in this quote, they do, to an extent. No person reads everyones emails, a software goes through and picks out key words. And though everyone says that they had no idea, it is stated clearly in the FAQ section for gmail. They are not trying to hide the fact that they are scanning emails. As stated in another article from the Huffington Post, "Why Online Privacy Protection is Not Just About the NSA," by Sanjay Sanghoee, "companies do provide legal privacy policies, but these are often so dense as to be unintelligible, and also full of clever tricks to fool consumers." (Sanghoee) The information about what Google is doing is out there, it may just not be the easiest thing to find. Google also claimed on PrivacySOS.org that "it has the right to collect your most sensitive data, as long as it flows across an open wifi network." (qtd. in Salon) seen in the Salon article, "4 ways Google is destroying privacy and collecting your data."

While it may seem that Google is taking things far with that statement, the US Federal Government has made similar statements about texts and emails, according to the New York Times article, "Facebook Generation Rekindles Expectations of Privacy Online," where people should not reasonably expect things willingly shared online or thorough texts to be private. They also are some of the strongest opponents of encryption, as seen in BBC News
Argument Paper

In an article, "WhatsApp starts encrypting users messages," they state that "tech firms have faced criticism by law enforcement figures," because it is now more difficult to "track criminals and extremists." (BBC) This shows that this perceived invasion of privacy is not only found in the companies like Google, but also in our own government.

What does all of this mean? First, neither Google or the law enforcement sees accessing this information through emails, texts, and web searches as an invasion of privacy. These are seen as public information due to the methods people use. Therefore it is not necessarily a breach of privacy. This does not mean that everything on your phone is free game, the Supreme Court says that you can not search phones without a warrant. It does however mean that in the eyes of the law, anything willingly posted online is available to them.

There have been other instances where the Supreme Court has come into play for privacy. There was the Privacy act of 1974, which protected the government from disclosing private information, the Financial Modernization Act of 1999, protecting against the disclosure of financial information, and the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, for children online under 13, requiring parental consent for them to join, among other things. Despite these acts, there is very little regarding the protection of the more modern information being put online. There have been suggested bills, like the one by Obama mentioned earlier, but nothing drastic so far.

For now, it seems as though Mark Zuckerberg might be right in his claim that privacy is "no longer a social norm," and that people have to be dependent on themselves to reduce their digital footprint. Technology is advancing, and the collection of data by companies allows them to gain a better understanding of what the consumers want, what they like about the products that they have, and how they can be improved. Without this collection of data, that
would never be possible on its current scale. And with new advances like the Google Glasses, some level of privacy is going to have to be sacrificed to fully take advantage of the new technology.

Aside from just the technology changing, people and the way they share information is changing. When something is willingly shared online, and the person doing the sharing did not look at the terms and conditions of the website, (which honestly is most of us) or did not fully understand the terms, which we already established were often hard to follow, then they cannot complain when the information is used in a way they did not anticipate. Companies are not the ones putting the information out there, people are the ones making the decisions to make their life public. Mark Zuckerberg made this point in a statement about the privacy policy on Facebook, "You have control over how your information is shared." Sanghoee made a similar point in his article, "This is part of the problem of course. Every time a user enters information about himself... somewhere on the internet, there is a high chance that information will wind up somewhere else, usually as part of a marketing partnership." The unclear privacy policies are the responsibility of the consume to understand, even if that means taking the extra time to question the company further on their own.

I believe that if a person wants to have privacy online, it is up to them to ensure they have it. There is a growing number of encryption methods, as well and disappearing messages, such as snapchat, Cyberdust, and GoTenna, all with messages that either self-destruct or disappear after being seen by the recipient. When people are willingly sharing information about themselves without fully understanding what will be done with that information, it is not the companies fault when they do not like how it is shared. The opposing side of this would say that people should be able to expect privacy without having to worry about confusing privacy
Argument Paper

policies, and I agree that the policies could be improved. There is no reason to make all of the policies hard to understand, if not just to prevent further problems when people realize what is actually going on. However, I do not think that the companies have to be careful with information you willingly gave them. It is up to individuals to be responsible about what they share if they are concerned with their privacy. The companies are not out to protect privacy, they exist to make money and improve their technologies. Part of doing that is targeting advertisements and seeing what people think about different products. To expect privacy from these companies is, as it is with law enforcement, unreasonable.

Bibliography


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