COSK 1221

Argumentative Essay

**Are Surveillance Programs an Invasion of Privacy?**

Name:

Institution:

Privacy is the ability of an individual or a group to hide any information they feel should not be subjected to public access. However, different cultures have varying definitions of privacy. According to Hughes, privacy is a multi-faceted concept which derives its meaning in particular situations from the social context and the way which people experience and respond to those situations. From this definition, it can be claimed that privacy is part of society and the people’s experience of its existence and or importance differs according to situations. People are also likely to respond differently when faced with what might be described as privacy intruding scenarios (Hughes, 2012). Essentially, this creates the multi-faceted character of privacy. Therefore privacy can be defined as a human experience and people erect physical or normative barriers to protect their privacy based on their own perception or their respective society’s opinion on privacy. From this statement, it is sufficient to conclude that privacy is the respect of these barriers. For individuals to experience and retain their dignity, it is also important that their privacy is protected at any time (Hughes, 2012). There are different ways which can lead to the intrusion of an individual’s privacy. These include basic intrusion such as impersonation, publication of private information and intrusion of solitude. In the growing government sensitivity to an apparent protection of national security, invasion of privacy can also be caused by surveillance programs which include use of CCTV cameras, wiretapping and internet surveillance (ACLU, n.d). Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) cameras are used to take visual information of the targeted individuals. In contrast, wiretapping is the surveillance of a target’s mobile communications including phone calls and text messages. On the other hand, internet surveillance involves the recording interception and analysis of internet communications. This type of surveillance is more complex and a potential business opportunity. As a result, there are private companies focused on getting information from the internet which they sell to government agencies. Surveillance is primarily carried out because of power and it is systematic in nature rather than a random and arbitrary act. Additionally, it is carried out with a purpose which has been identified as subtler control of the population. Surveillance has a wide scope that varies from one country to another. For instance, the Chinese government uses surveillance to identify government dissidents whereas the US and Britain use surveillance under the precept of curbing terror attacks especially after the 9/11 and London subway bombings (Richards, 2013). Despite the supposed goodwill behind this activity, it is an outright abuse of privacy due to the collection of confidential information.

As already seen, there has been a widespread use of Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) cameras. Specifically the urban life has been proliferated by these surveillance tools. Despite the initial public enthusiasm about the cameras, over-installation of the devices has led to the re-evaluation of this notion. The cause of this has been reduced costs of production due to technological advances such as the existence of digital storage which offers better quality compared to analog storage. There has also been a reduction in the installation costs and this is projected to fall further with the advance of wireless connections. The analogy of the Panopticon idea can be used to explain government’s video surveillance on the citizenry. Basically, this idea was implemented in prisons where they were constantly being monitored by a guard. Also, the prison ensured that the prisoners were made aware that they were being watched. As a result, the prisoners were subdued to behave in a particular way. In this case, video surveillance by the government (prison guard) on the public (prisoners in this analogy) can be equated to this activity. Moreover, there have been claims that the CCTVs have no massive impact on the reduction of crime (Welsh and Farrington, 2007). The cause of this could be the prejudicial surveillance of a particular section of the population. For instance, a research carried out in Britain found out that young males and blacks were systematically and disproportionately targeted. Consequently, there is a lack of proportion between the risks and benefits of this activity (ACLU, n.d).

Surveillance is an attack on the liberty of the citizens. Systematic surveillance on the population has not only been carried out through the use of CCTV cameras but also through the use of databases to decrypt private information, most notably, there have been reports that the Nation Intelligence Service is building g a mega supercomputing complex that will be used to intercept and decrypt much of the global internet communications. Laws that protect the population against such unscrupulous government actions exist but it is difficult to bring the government to task because of the covert nature these acts are executed. In the US, government security agencies and especially the NIS have been blamed for propagating the surveillance agenda. Notably, this particular agency has been behind several wiretapping activities (Pankanti et al., 2005). This Government surveillance of the internet is the power with potential massive abuse. First it inhibits the exercise of liberties. Back to the Panopticon idea, the prisoners were subjected to surveillance to make them behave in a desired manner. In the case of civil liberties, surveillance of the intellectual activities of the population can cause people not to experiment with new ideas. Secondly, surveillance can cause a disparity between the watcher and the watched (Richards, 2013). Basically, this means that the government can carry out discriminatory and coercive attacks on targeted individuals of the population without opposing views. However, surveillance is not exclusive to security agencies alone. There is sufficient evidence to suggest that private companies are also participants in the intrusion of privacy. These private corporations collect analyze and sell personal data in what has been called Big Data surveillance with the intention of influencing consumer preferences. Fundamentally, this is the basis on in which internet giants such as Facebook and Google are built on.

Despite claims that surveillance is bad, there are claims that surveillance can actually pay dividends. This concept is called the privacy-privacy tradeoff and it can be experienced in varying ways. For instance, when Google introduced the right to be forgotten concept, the forgotten information resurfaced on the internet few days later. Basically, this can be attributed to the Streisand effect. The Streisand effect holds that tan attempt to withhold a piece of information actually leads to increased public attention on the issue. In addition, if the privacy of passengers in an aircraft is increased, the risk of a terror attack also increases. The need to balance of privacy against can arise from various instances. For instance, if the government implements a policy of surveillance on a particular group of the population, another group might benefit from this activity. Taking the example of surveillance of the Muslim population in a certain region, the surveillance might lead to violation of the privacy of Muslims but it will benefit the rest of the population. There are also instances where a violator of privacy is also a protector of privacy. For instance, a site such as Kinder might prevent other people from peeping on the content you are viewing while notifying consumers of the content you are accessing. A particular policy may also cause a reduction in privacy risks after some time. For example, if a certain security company guarding an airport asks someone for their private information, this could protect one’s privacy because they wouldn’t be required to take off their shoes, belt and other accessories. Moreover, there are instances where the privacy tradeoffs might lead to the mitigation of a problem. Case in point is the military policy where gay officers were prevented from coming out in the open caused the gay officers difficulties in openly declaring their sexual orientation. The officers often concealed information about their sexual preference but this also inversely affected their feelings. Finally, these tradeoffs are unique from each other and their popularity depends on the case requiring their applicability (Pozen, 2016).

In conclusion, the issue of surveillance on privacy has been extensively studied in this paper. Moreover, the issue of privacy has been explored and a more meaningful and universally acceptable definition of privacy has been given. In this definition, privacy can be described as a social concept that differs in concept depending on a particular society’s understanding of the issue. In addition, an individual’s perception of privacy has been described as arising from their respective society’s understanding of privacy. Moreover, the different methods of surveillance employed by governments have been appraised. Here, the reasons behind the need for surveillance on the population by different governments were looked into. The issue of use of CCTV surveillance on the populace has also been analyzed. Under this section, the use of these visual devices was evaluated and its suitability for the purported purpose supporting their use was reviewed. Further, the paper tried to present the issue of internet surveillance. This was perhaps the most important discussion in this paper. Basically, this is due to the rising popularity of the internet as demonstrated in the argument. Here, activities of government agencies in trying to control the behavior of the citizenry through systematic analysis and decryption of internet communications were reviewed. In addition, activities that amount to surveillance employed by internet corporations were also explained. Demonstrations were made on how these companies such as Facebook and Google collect personal information from users which they then sell to manufacturers. In the final section, the idea of privacy-privacy tradeoffs has also been demonstrated in the paper. Importantly, the paper tries to see whether all privacy surveillances are wrong. In this section, it was demonstrated that willful submission of privacy to a policy making body can result in benefits. It also proves that an act of violation of privacy on a particular group can cause marginal benefits to another group. However, despite this, surveillance on the population is a violation of the privacy. Not only does it violate the civil rights of individuals but it also interferes with the intellectual right thus undermining the ability of the individuals to experience life to a fulfilling capacity.

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