The issue of privacy has become a growing concern as technology continues to integrate more than before into our daily lives. Social media in particular has been a target of this as willingly many people put personal information to see on their social media accounts. For these accounts, it is usually the case that you can set your account to private which only allows certain people to view your detailed profile. For many people this is enough to ease anxious thoughts about their privacy being violated online but recent findings say otherwise.

Geofeedia is a US-based software company that analyzes posts made on social media in order to surveil locations and help law enforcement track down crimes or alert them about a potential crime. They have notably been focusing their forces on tracking down ongoing protests related to the Black Lives Matter Movement and for this reason Geofeedia has been accused of unjustly targeting the actions of minority groups. The popularity of smartphones in the past decade have made it easy for companies such as Geofeedia to look into the location of each smartphone user in order to carry out surveillance.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has taken notice of Geofeedia’s recent actions and has made statements stating that the information that Geofeedia is searching is violating the privacy of the average American citizen. Their arguing point is that Geofeedia is taking the information of these user who are unaware that they are even being researched by Geofeedia to begin with. But still there are arguments that this information posted through social media is fair because it is meant for all to see. The ACLU has taken their fight further by proving to and showing the public that law enforcement is searching through data found in social media for their own purposes. Since then social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook have restricted Geofeedia’s access in order to protect their users form unwanted surveillance.

I was personally unaware that surveillance through social media has been taken this far but it’s also something that doesn’t necessarily surprise me. The issue of surveillance has been a factor in many countries across the world for decades. The UK is known in particular for its thorough surveillance of its public and the US itself has since 2001 greatly increased the level of surveillance that occurs within the country. These governments often feel it is in their best interest to increase their surveillance in order to protect the general public from disastrous events that may occur.

The other side’s argument against this is where does all this surveillance cross the line. The inclusion of social media into the topics also makes gives the issues much more of a grey area concerning whether it is morally correct or not. I personally agree with the likes of Facebook and Twitter with where they drew their line. Other companies such as Yahoo have been recently been under suspicion of working alongside the government to support their surveillance (Siluk). Which goes to show that many companies themselves are divided on this issue and a good deal of company politics plays along with which side they decide to choose. Either way many of these users on these platforms were not aware that they were being
monitored. This was even worse for the case of the users who previously thought that their “private” accounts were shielded from the public eye.

The other concerning issue that Geofeedia ran into was they there work in surveillance gave them the image that they were targeting only minority groups which to many can be seen as discriminatory behavior. Personally this is the hardest part to argue for either side since I don’t think this was necessarily Geofeedia’s fault but more of just what happens to be one of the more frequently talked about recent topics in social media and other websites. Unfortunately for Geofeedia, the recent topics of the Black Lives Matter movement and refugee crisis in Europe/the growing attacks of ISIS are issues that are attached to minority groups which can make companies such as Geofeedia appear discriminatory if they choose to pursue into researching these topics.

With that being said I do think that it was right for the above mentioned social media sites to restrict Geofeedia’s access since they did not have the permission of the users. This case would have been much different had the users signed some sort of electronic form that gave companies such as Geofeedia to monitor their users based on their permission. That’s the only way I think justifies Geofeedia’s actions but regardless with the interest of the law enforcement in the analytics of the social media, I’m sure that there will be many future attempts in order to find a way to surveil those online profiles. My final question for this case would be: While the ACLU has protected the interest of American citizens how do nations’ citizens from across the world feel about the surveillance of their online social media presence?
Works Cited