Data & Information Assignment

Based on the article “Facebook, Twitter and Instagram Send Feeds That Helped Police Track Minorities in Ferguson and Baltimore” written by Craig Timber and Elizabeth Dwoskin, it is clear that the privacy of internet users, particularly social media account owners are at risk. Directly quoting the article, it talks about “a powerful surveillance program that police used for tracking racially charged protests in Baltimore and Ferguson, Mo., [relying] on special feeds of user data provided by Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, according to an ACLU report Tuesday.” Over 500 law enforcement agencies are currently utilizing Geofeedia’s services where it “analyzes social media posts to deliver real-time surveillance information” through social media companies like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. After the discovery of this issue, said social media companies had started to cut off access for Geofeedia. (Timberg, Craig, and Elizabeth Dwoskin. “Facebook, Twitter and Instagram Sent Feeds That Helped Police Track Minorities in Ferguson and Baltimore, Report Says.”)

The ACLU stands for the American Civil Liberties Union, where “For nearly 100 years, [they have been the] nation’s guardian to defend and preserve the individual rights and liberties that the Constitution and the laws of the United States guarantee everyone in [the] country. Whether it’s achieving full equality for lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people; establishing new privacy protections for our digital age of widespread government surveillance; ending mass incarceration; or preserving the right to vote or the right to have an abortion; the ACLU takes up the toughest civil liberties cases and issues to defend all people from government abuse and overreach.” (“About the ACLU.”) After being made aware of to these leading social media companies, they have been pushed towards taking action in order to protect their users. Geofeedia’s chief executive officer Phil Harris released a statement ensuring that “the company is committed to the principles of personal privacy, transparency and both the
letter and the spirit of the law when it comes to individual rights... The firm works to ensure end-users do not seek to inappropriately identify individuals based on race, ethnicity, religious, sexual orientation or political beliefs, among other factors. That said, [they] understand that [they] must continue to work to build on these critical protections of civil rights,” as an explanation to back the company’s motives up.

The government is thought to target minority groups or anyone else “seeking to publicly air political grievances [or] potentially chilling free speech” through the services of Geofeedia, which has the potential to go against the freedom of speech for these individuals. At the same time, this causes discrimination against people of color, activists even, if their rights are not protected. With the current rise of social media, there will be bound for cases where social media users, especially teenagers who do not actually think of the implications of their statements in tweets and Facebook posts might be targeted by governments. It is known that several “trigger” or “watch” words such as “ISIS”, “terrorism”, “shooting”, “bombs”, “gang”, “marijuana” and many more are said to be monitored in real-time by the NSA as means to protect the country against unwanted terrorism or violence. The list also includes normal words such as “subway”, “pork”, “social media” and “worm” which raises the question of what really is the thing that the government is looking for, and how far into our information have they gone through? (Pinola, Melanie. "Words to Avoid Online If You Don't Want to Join the Government's Watch List."

With the establishment of services like one of Geofeedia's, governments are given the ease of access to a wide array of information of their own citizens. While this is powerful and might be beneficial in some cases like crime monitoring in particular, several drawbacks will come forth, one being a major invasion of one’s privacy. Through the sharing of information by Geofeedia taken from sites like Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, this act runs the major risk of
privacy issues. In cases of this resource is used to target people of color in particular, a serious issue regarding racism arises, as normal content might be overanalyzed and thought to be a threat.

In this era of when the Black Lives Matter movement is growing, we have seen social media platforms explode after the shooting of Michael Brown, Walter Scott, Tamir Rice and sadly, many more. (Quah, Nicholas. "Here’s A Timeline Of Unarmed Black People Killed By Police Over Past Year.") These tweets and posts arose based on the anger of the public of the injustice towards the African American community, representing free speech and the opinions of the country’s citizens. I think that the action of targeting specific minority groups like the African Americans can lead to some misunderstanding. At times when emotions are heightened, especially after specific tragedies of the death of anyone in the black community, angry posts are bound to arise. If taken out of context, words can be interpreted wrongly and generalized, and activists might be thought to be violent when they are not. We have seen individuals being arrested for protesting, sometimes even when their protests are nothing but peaceful and when the government purposefully targets these people, it is in a way discriminating.

In my opinion, a way that I understand governments’ need for surveillance over social media is that they are trying to avoid another “Edward Snowden” to happen. Edward Snowden was a “former government contractor who revealed secrets from the National Security Agency’s spying program.” The article mentions, “While some call Snowden a traitor who disclosed American secrets, others call him a patriot who exposed violations of the constitution.” This shows that there will always be two sides of opinions by the public, and that even if someone thinks that the government surveillance is acceptable, others might not. Some might argue that we have signed the terms and conditions that allow these companies to have access to our data, but does that really make things ethical? I think that governments should definitely be honest and
transparent about what they do, especially when interfering with people's personal information. When they don’t, this becomes highly unethical causing cases like Edward Snowden’s to take place and at the same time confusing the public as to which sides they should be taking in the question of whether the government or Snowden is the one at fault. (Quah, Nicholas. "Here’s A Timeline Of Unarmed Black People Killed By Police Over Past Year.")

Social media companies should definitely have more robust public policies for sharing this type of information to avoid running the risks of government being intrusive. An article regarding the issue with human rights problem with social media, it is clear that one of the biggest issues with the lack of robust policies would be the risk for personal liberty. The article states that “This is no small problem. When we’re put under surveillance, it limits speech and shrinks both the size and diversity of the marketplace of ideas. As U.N. Special Rapporteur Frank La Rue stated, “communications surveillance should be regarded as a highly intrusive act that potentially interferes with the rights to freedom of expression and privacy and threatens the foundations of a democratic society.” If a regime of social media surveillance is developed, it must be developed with safeguards to avoid suppressing free expression and compromising our democratic values,” which perfectly describes the issue with social media surveillance by the government. (Lamont, Keir. "The Human Rights Problem with Social Media Monitoring.")

All in all, there obviously will be costs to any choices made as we cannot possibly have both the benefits of security and protection of personal privacy at the same time. The question is where would be the specific line of when the government would cross the boundaries that deems their “surveillance” over their citizens’ information as unethical, causing major privacy issues? If there is any, how would we come to a common reasoning of what the line would be like?
Works Cited


