Discriminatory Surveillance

An online program called Geofeedia uses data from popular social media platforms to track different protests and crimes. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram provided data which included photos, locations, and other posts. This data was sent to the company Geofeedia, which uses the data to respond to crime (Dwoskin & Timberg). With help from the ACLU, the social media platforms realized the publicity and notoriety this company was getting, and they stopped releasing their data to this company.

The authors explain that the popularity of Geofeedia emphasizes that social media has given all governments the information necessary to keep track of crime or the discontent of different citizens. Dwoskin and Timberg highlight that Geofeedia tends to focus on the activities of minorities. Nicole Ozer, a policy director at ACLU of California, puts emphasis on the fact that these social media networks need to be protecting the free speech of its users, and to stop handing over data that could be potentially be used in wrong ways (Ozer).

Goodfeedia’s CEO, Phil Harris, stated that the company's intentions are not to profile anyone based on race, sexual orientation, political beliefs, or religion. Despite this statement, Twitter suspended its partnership with Geofeedia. It was reported that the data provided by Facebook and Instagram was being used incorrectly. Additionally, Malika Cyril, the executive director for Media Justice, explains that social media affects people of color more negatively. She goes on to explain that the Black Lives Matter movement is being “spied on” with the use of
the data provided by these different social media platforms (Cyril). Civil Liberties groups have made claims that social media needs to implement more regulations so that the government does not have as much access to use the data for surveillance on its citizens.

I believe this article has a lot of truth written in it, and that social media does need to support its users. The fact that these extremely popular platforms are providing data to surveillance companies seems like an abuse of power. Additionally, the movements and groups of people being surveilled are a cause of controversy. I agree that the principles of surveillance are useful and necessary when it comes to keeping the safety of citizens. The minute that this surveillance becomes discriminatory is where the entire system of monitoring becomes unjust and leaves a negative impact.

According to Toshimaru Ogura, through the innovations of surveillance, the race, age, and gender of the persons being watched can be identified. He goes on to explain that the presence of racism in our society “legitimize[s] surveillance and weaken[s] civil liberties” (Ogaru). This means that because of racism, surveillance is justified, which jeopardizes the privacy of people who are discriminated. Despite the glaring adverse effects, this justification of monitoring brings, citizens have very little control over what data is being provided to the government. In concession, people can limit the information that they post on social media, but the government still has access to other data that can be retrieved just by someone owning a smartphone.

The book, Surveillance as Social Sorting: Privacy, Risk, and Digital Discrimination, highlights the fact that with more information available about the people being monitored, the better the surveillance can be tailored to the individual. Despite this fact, the variables of race,
socioeconomic status, and gender start to affect the surveillance being administered. Searchable databases provide an easy way to uncover information about particular groups of people, and in this example, the searchable database is being used for marketing purposes. These databases provide information about different family’s socioeconomic status, the sizes of their houses, how many children they have, their ethnic background, and the religion they practice. This information provides marketers with the means to target different groups they think will bring them the most success (Lyon). The more affluent families receive more information, better deals, while less-affluent families have to make do with less. This picking and choosing of who gets different information is a perfect example of why surveillance can lead to discrimination and prejudice.

While surveillance can be a favorable solution in regards to monitoring crime through the internet, surveillance that results in the treatment of certain demographics of people in unfair ways is unacceptable. These surveillance methods should be reevaluated and changed to ensure the equal treatment of all people. If the government and different companies are going to continue to surveil the population, policies and laws need to be implemented to ensure an objective approach to surveillance.

Question:
If the government has so much access to our activities on the internet and social media, what other parts of our lives is the government monitoring without our knowledge?
Works Cited
