Assignment 2

Due: Saturday, February 9 at noon

Length: 1800-2200 words

For students enrolled in the Writing in the Major version of the class, you will receive comments on this paper, and there will be a required revision.

The papers will be graded without knowledge of your identity. Please submit the paper with YOUR STANFORD ID number on a cover page along with the WORD COUNT (not including footnotes/bibliography).

Your section leader will give you additional information regarding how to submit the assignment.

Do not plagiarize. Plagiarism frequently happens unintentionally, so if you are in doubt about your use of external sources, ask your instructor.

Stanford’s plagiarism policy and further links: http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/communitystandards/integrity/plagiarism

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS

Choose one of the following paper topics. Your essay should state and defend a thesis. You must use and cite specific examples from our readings to illustrate and support your argument. Although we encourage you to draw on lectures and section discussions to elucidate your argument, you must foreground your own insights and analysis of multiple readings, and demonstrate your use of them beyond merely revisiting quotes or arguments that were discussed in lectures and sections. You are encouraged – but not required – to consult supplemental readings listed on the syllabus.
Question 1:  
Facebook and Facial Recognition  

Our case study discusses a 2012 United States Senate hearing in which then-Senator Al Franken interrogated Facebook Privacy and Public Policy Manager Rob Sherman about the company’s deployment of facial recognition tools. Franken challenged Sherman to explain why photo tag suggestions – which uses facial recognition to identify users in photos uploaded by their friends – had been enabled across the site as a default (instead of as an opt-in feature). Sherman responded:

“People choose to be on Facebook because they want to share with each other. Beyond that, tag suggestions are only used in the context of an opt-in friend relationship on Facebook, which means that you would not be suggested to somebody as a potential tag for a photo unless both parties to the relationship had already decided to communicate with one another on Facebook, had already seen each other’s photos. So we are actually not exposing any additional information to anybody as a part of this process.” (at p. 26 of the US Senate hearing)

Write an essay in which you do the following two things:

(a) What does this excerpt from Sherman’s statement reveal about Facebook’s conception of privacy? How does the company (as represented by Sherman) view its users’ privacy interests and its own responsibilities to protect them?
(b) Provide a philosophical argument defending or objecting to the conception you identify. If you think Facebook’s understanding of privacy and its duties to protect users’ privacy is justifiable, then justify it; if you think the company privacy policy with respect to facial recognition is flawed, explain what’s wrong with it and why.

In your answer, be sure to discuss three or more readings (assigned or supplementary) in the data privacy module.
Question 2:
Contextual Privacy

People engage in many different online behaviors. A small catalog would include:

- online payment of federal taxes
- posting messages on social media services such as Twitter or Facebook or Instagram
- learning via Khan Academy on YouTube
- looking up reference materials on Wikipedia
- searching for information on Google
- walking down a public street while being filmed by closed circuit cameras
- sending email with GMail
- watching a movie on Netflix
- donating money to their favorite nonprofit organization

Helen Nissenbaum writes: “As social contexts, activities, roles, and rules migrate online, respective context-specific values, ends, and purposes serve as standards against which information-sharing practices can be evaluated as legitimate or problematic. (Nissenbaum, “A Contextual Approach to Privacy Online,” p. 44).

Elucidate Nissenbaum's argument concerning context-specific values, ends, and purposes as standards to evaluate the privacy practices of various online activities. Apply Nissenbaum’s contextual integrity approach to two or three of the examples listed above. Your choices should illuminate different approaches to privacy. Be sure to identify and consider strong arguments against Nissenbaum’s own view (drawn from other readings on the syllabus) as applied to the examples you discuss.

You must use and cite specific examples from our readings to illustrate and support your argument.

Question 3:
Privacy and encryption

Beginning in 2014, the communication app WhatsApp enabled end-to-end encryption for all messages on the platform, making it impossible for third parties – including governments and WhatsApp itself – to read user messages. The company’s adoption of secure encryption (enabled by default) allows over a billion people globally to communicate without fear of surveillance.

Write an essay in which you develop a framework for morally (not legally) evaluating the decision of any tech company in enabling end-to-end encryption. In your answer, you should consider (at least) the interest of governmental and law enforcement access to encrypted data for public safety purposes. Your essay should explain what factors count most in favor of the decision to encrypt (if any
count in favor), what factors count most against it (if any count against), and how those factors might interact (if any interact). Make sure to identify (and respond to) objections to your own view, and be sure to discuss three or more readings (assigned or supplementary) in the data privacy module.

Some Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper.
For any student who has never written a philosophy paper before, we strongly encourage you to read the paper writing guides on the course website.

Many students believe that writing a paper in philosophy is unlike any other kind of writing. This is an exaggeration. Writing a good philosophy paper is very much like writing a good paper in history, economics, literature, or biology. A good paper requires a particularly careful use of language and a particularly close examination of ideas and arguments. Because a good paper is a good paper, the guidelines sketched here apply with equal force in other courses as well.

It’s important, however, to stress just how central good writing is when doing philosophy. As a general matter, your writing is a good measure of your ability to communicate ideas. But in philosophy, the quality of your writing is not just a measure of your ability to communicate; it is also a measure of your ability to think. If you cannot express your thoughts in a clear, concise, and cohesive manner, then your thoughts themselves are not clear, concise, or cohesive. Philosophical writing exercises your thinking; learning to write better is inseparable from learning to think better. In philosophy, becoming a good writer is the same thing as become a good thinker.