

Class Activity 1 – COVID-19 + PATRIOT Act:

Is the COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis around it any different from the 9/11 incident? If they are different, is there an argument that can justify the use of broad warrantless technology-driven surveillance of people (e.g., like what was allowed under the PATRIOT Act) during the COVID-19 crisis that were found to be deeply problematic in the 9/11 context? Why?

Class Activity 2 – Public-Private Partnership around COVID-19:

Should the tech companies and the US government partner to use geotagged data to identify potential COVID-19 infections and its community spread? Discuss using a Kantian approach, an act utilitarian and a rule utilitarian approach.

Class Activity 3 – MIT’s PrivateKit: Safe paths app:

As introduced in Monday’s class, the MIT app called PrivateKit: Safe paths¹ is a tool where an individual, infected by the coronavirus can voluntarily opt-in to share their location data from their phone. The idea is that the app can then track where this infected person has been and who they have crossed paths with. Eventually, the app shares this personal data with other users in a privacy-preserving way, such as those, who are likely to be in the close vicinity of the infected person over a two week period in the past.

The creator of the app, Ramesh Raskar said that: *“People give their stem cells for patients that need a stem cell transplantation. They give their blood. We hope that people think about the crisis, and are willing to give their data.”*

Do you think it is an ethically reasonable comparison – that is, is asking someone to share/donate sensitive, personal data same as donating their blood, organ, or stem cells? Why?

¹ <http://privatekit.mit.edu/welcome-private-kit>

Class Activity 4 – Uber as a technology company:

For many years, Silicon Valley companies have hailed themselves as technology companies; to quote a Wired article²:

Facebook and Google insist they aren't publishers. They are platforms, which publish works and apply algorithms so that people are sure to find what they want. White nationalism? Anti-vaccination pseudoscience? A publisher might care about spreading such material, but they aren't that. They're platforms, remember?

Airbnb isn't a hotel. Do its hosts discriminate? Does it wreak havoc on neighborhoods? A hotel might be required to have zero tolerance about such abuses. A platform can shrug its shoulders.

YouTube isn't a TV channel. Are young children marketed to with tawdry advertising? Do recommended videos encourage anger and isolation? A TV channel might care, or be required to care. But a platform? Oh well.

Gig economy services like Uber – as discussed in the Wednesday's class, are also no exception. Uber's top lawyer, Tony West was recently found saying: "The company's drivers aren't employees, even under the proposed new law, because Uber's main business isn't driving people around. The company is serving as a technology platform for several different types of digital marketplaces."

Using any ethical theory of your choice, outline a few different reasons why Uber and similar companies ought to acknowledge that they are more than a technology company, in the case of Uber, that they are a ride-hailing/transportation company.

² <https://www.wired.com/story/how-tech-firms-like-uber-hide-behind-the-platform-defense/>