

Ethics of the Street

Prof. Simon Rogerson

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Google Street View is a facility within Google Maps and Google Earth that provides 360° horizontal and 290° vertical panoramic images of streets. It was launched in the United States on May 25, 2007 and now covers many towns and cities in United States, United Kingdom, Netherlands, France, Italy, Spain, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. Google suggests with Street View, "... you can easily find the exact location for your crucial meeting and the nearest coffee shop, plan a restaurant venue to meet friends for dinner, or find the best viewing spot for a marathon or parade. If you are moving house or re-locating, you can save time by exploring properties and their surrounding area in advance and also by looking up driving directions. Street View allows you to check out a hotel or holiday home before you book, and to explore different travel destinations around the world."

There have been mixed reactions to Street View around the world. There are many supporters. For example, the BBC reported that Tate have worked with Google to integrate precise locations in the UK associated with artworks by JMW Turner and John Constable, which can then be viewed alongside their real-world locations. There have been numerous complaints about invasions of privacy. In Japan complaints that Street View cameras were mounted so high that pictures were taken over private fences and into homes has led to Google lowering cameras by 16 inches and retaking streets pictures. However, for example, the Information Commissioner's Office in the UK ruled in 2008 that the face-blurring and licence plate-blurring were sufficient to ensure that privacy was maintained.

The Google policy on personal privacy states, "Street View only features photographs taken on public property and the imagery is no different from what a person can readily see or capture walking down the street. Imagery of this kind is available in a wide variety of formats for cities all around the world. We are committed to respecting local laws and norms in each country in which we launch Street View. Blurring technology and operational controls like image removal are amongst the ways in which we ensure that an individuals' privacy is respected. We make it easy for users to ask to have photographs of themselves, their children, their cars or their houses completely removed from the product, even where the images have already been blurred."

A cursory tranche of Street View in Coventry, UK revealed many vehicles with the registration plates not blurred and many people with their faces visible. It is true that Google provide a mechanism to rectify this. The visible plate JxxxPxx of a car in the drive of 35 Wrigsham Street was reported and information requested as to why this had not been blurred. Four weeks later, the plate is now blurred but there has been no communication to confirm this or a response to the question.

Is it reasonable to have a system which is not accurate in blurring images and which places the burden on the public to report flaws and request such flaws are rectified? Is it reasonable that there is no communication to complainants that such flaws have been rectified? It is uncertain whether the recording of pictures from a moving camera with surround vision high in the air is the same as a person standing in the street or even on the top of a double-decker bus. Google claims it is. However, the former is a comprehensive permanent view that can be revisited whilst that latter is a temporary view with restricted field of vision. Google's action to remove images following a complaint comes too late because many of these images have often been captured and presented on websites explicitly set up to show Street View images. Some images have become infamous. These include images of an old woman inadvertently exposing herself, men and women urinating in the street, naked sunbathers, a young male, who is possibly a burglar, climbing into a window of a house, and people entering and leaving adult entertainment establishments. These are data shadows which are impossible to remove as they have now seeped across the web. Whatever harm has been caused by such images cannot be reversed.

Whilst Google identify legitimate uses for Street View in 'Top 10 Street View tips for everyday use' and 'Top 10 Street View tips for businesses and organizations' there are also unacceptable potential uses that can be made of it. For example, it is easy to identify houses which have burglar alarms and windows open which can then be used to draw up a short lists of burglary targets. Areas where children frequent can be identified and even with face blurring some children can be recognised both of which increase risks to child safety. Currently towns and cities are being photographed but when small conurbations of just a few houses are photographed then lack of anonymity increases. Images of people in embarrassing situations could lead to harassment.

The technology behind Google Maps, Google Earth and Google Street View is impressive. It provides an amazing interactive image of our world. However, it is an uncontrollable image because of the way in which flaws and complaints are handled retrospectively.

Please send your views on ethical and social responsibility issues and cases of ethical dilemmas to:

Professor Simon Rogerson
Director
Centre for Computing and Social Responsibility
Faculty of Computing Sciences and Engineering
De Montfort University
The Gateway
Leicester
LE1 9BH
Tel: (+44) 116 257 7475
Fax: (+44) 116 207 8159
Email: <srog@dmu.ac.uk>
Website: <http://www.ccsr.cse.dmu.ac.uk/>