Assignment 7: databases and privacy

Assignment*:*

Your assignment is to present two opposing views describing the benefits and drawbacks of creating big databases of information about individuals.

What are the most interesting, useful, intriguing, revolutionary things that can be done with such databases? How can they enhance life for the individual and improve society? In particular, how can they enhance the computer-mediated world, where identity is currently so sparsely depicted.

What are the most serious drawbacks to creating such databases? Are there social or technological approaches that ameliorate these concerns? Under what circumstances are these drawbacks most serious?

Databases:

Around the turn of the century, the Dutch started collecting massive amounts of data about their citizens for genuinely good reasons. They wanted to have all of the genealogical data on record for their citizens; they wanted to give individuals proper burials. In 1940, Nazi Germany invaded Holland and captured all of this meticulous data within 3 days, having the appropriate data to track down and execute an absurd percentage of the Jewish population in a matter of days.

Databases are tricky. They make our lives much easier at the same time that they offer terrible potential when put into the wrong hands. It is that potential for harm that makes databases terrifying because, even when data with the best of intentions is aggregated, it provides detailed data about individuals that can be used in harmful ways.

Genealogy work is a great example of where databases are both fantastic and terrifying. On one hand, databases eliminate the research nightmares of dealing with local churches/synagogues/legal systems, allowing individuals to more rapidly determine their history. In this way, the public access of this information is a blessing. Turn the problem on its heels. When one is going through the hassle of tracking down one's genealogy, one rarely considers researching one's friends, colleagues or other individuals. But, the simplicity of the web allows people to quickly access the genealogy of anyone, for better or for worse. Not only might this data be embarrassing (i.e. being related to a known historical villain), but it might also be medically invasive (known to be the offspring in a family with genetic diseases). Additionally, due to the lack of security, such databases make identity theft simple. The database is neither good nor bad, but the ways in which people can use them are.

Database Benefits:

One of the best uses of databases is to allow for the maintenance of important records for individual use. For example, having a complete medical history at my fingertips is essential when I enter the hospital because it gives the doctor a complete sense of what medical past s/he is working with, even if I am unconscious at the time. Even if I was conscious, my explanations of my medical history are most likely not to be at the level that the doctor would like. Thus, this data snapshot can be quite useful in conveying essential information.

Likewise, databases are an aid to daily life when they can store and process the massive amounts of data that we interact with on a daily basis - phone numbers, addresses, birthdays, calendar, song titles, etc. Information that we once focused intently on memorizing can now be kept in a 'secondary brain' of sorts, freeing our mind to deal with other issues.

Every day I use databases that make life a bit more convenient: IMDB, my books/CDs/movies databases, purchasing records, search engines, transit options, news articles, etc. This allows for fingertip access to information, the most beneficial aspect of databases. They give me some control over my world.

Database Drawbacks:

Databases not only provide me with information and data (about me and about library-esque information), but they also provide the database maintainers information about me. My actions are recorded and maintained, aggregated and computed. I have no control over this data, nor any access to its accuracy. It's used to create reputation scores that companies use to determine whether or not I'm a valuable customer (and thus, whether or not they should talk to me). Since computers are never wrong (ha!), databases remove the responsibility of hierarchies from those implementing them in a Milgram-esque fashion of duty without moral conflict. This allows for a systematic implementation of marginalization, as is being currently implemented in airports.

Databases are dangerous because they amplify the possibilities for those with greedy or malicious intentions, or even for those with economic pursuits who don't realize the impact of their technology. If society was utopian, databases would be harmless because no one would consider using them to inflict pain on others; that is not the society we live in.

Brin argues that a transparent society would be an ideal response to data storage. Sadly, I can't agree. Transparency would be ideal if individuals were homogeneous or explicitly tolerant. Transparency fails individuals who are protecting personal data for fear of marginalization/violence/hatred. The further one is from the globalized standard of 'average', the more likely an individual is to be a target with transparency.

Aggregation of data means that context is no longer important to social performance; we are always in the public spotlight when databases are involved. We can laugh at funny reminders of how databases are used to remind us of our past in

a different context, so long as we aren't the ones who can't get a job because of our political views.

The more the world is on edge, out to get entire classes of people; the more databases can function to cause harm. Like anything, databases are most useful/problematic when combined with power.

How then do you make certain that they can only be used for good purposes?