NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

ONE WAY SOCIAL NETWORKS MAY GET USERS TO SHARE MORE PRIVATE INFORMATION

The same people that say privacy is important also disclose a significant amount of personal information online. Whether posting their location on Facebook, intimate photos on Instagram, or work-related content on LinkedIn, private content is shared often on social networks, not to mention the habitual sharing of personal email addresses, telephone numbers, and birthday information on corporate websites and online shopping sites. Even in an era of massive privacy breaches, people still share a great deal of private information. If privacy is so important to people, why are they willing to disclose private personal information so easily? This discrepancy is often called the “privacy paradox,” but its central explanation—that people make rational disclosure choices online—has been called into question.

A study published in the Journal for the Association of Consumer Research suggests that one reason for the privacy paradox may be that privacy’s importance may not be as static and stable for consumers as once thought. That is, privacy can be more or less important to individuals depending on the moment, and two factors that might influence that importance include: 1) who is thought to be in control of managing privacy, and 2) how difficult managing privacy is perceived to be.

In a series of controlled experiments, researchers found that when managing privacy is thought to be difficult to do, people perceive privacy to be more important when they are in control but less important when a social media/online company is in control of managing privacy. Privacy’s importance, in turn, inversely predicts one’s intentions to disclose private (but not public) information. Thus, as managing privacy online becomes harder and harder to do, assurances from sites like Facebook, Apple, and Amazon that they will do more to control your privacy may lower a user’s perceived importance of privacy, which leads to the (perhaps) unintended consequence of users divulging even more private personal information than if users managed privacy themselves.