UNDER THE WATCHFUL EYE: USERS' PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE PRIVACY AND SURVEILLANCE

Alecea Standlee, Ph.D.
Gettysburg College, United States of America

Introduction

This project seeks to contribute to the question, "How do internet users navigate data privacy in a digitally surveilled online world?" I augment this ongoing discussion by examining the perceptions and practices concerning privacy and self-representation in digital spaces among young adults, 18-22. This qualitative work utilizes in-depth interviews of college students in the United States to collect both behavioral and attitudinal patterns. Specifically, I consider the impact of the strategic interventions of corporate and governmental platforms to collect, distribute, and utilize individual level data on research participants' information consumption, individual identity representation, and group affiliation. A preliminary analysis of the data finds participants engage in narrative rationalizations to help them navigate the cultural expectations of online engagement within a surveilled environment. Patterns of strategic self-representation are shaped by such rationalizations and justifications, including a fundamental shift in what the concept "privacy" means in an online world.

Review of the Literature

This cross-disciplinary work is situated within sociological social psychology and communication theory frameworks that consider the techno-mediated cultural integration of contemporary culture (Bazarova, 2014). Much existing scholarship focuses on privacy literacy, which identifies the degree to which social media participants, in particular young adults, understand the ways in which surveillance occurs (Choi, Park & Yung, 2018). Other work focuses on shifting social practices, and details how communication technologies are embedded in daily social life (Trepte, 2015). Scholars have identified significant consequences to this embedment, including specific transformations in the experience of privacy and surveillance among diverse populations (Engle, 2013). Privacy and technological interventions into "private life" are of concern to researchers, who focus on the relationship between technological communication and intimate social life (Lambert, 2013). This project seeks to contribute to emerging scholarship on the social impacts of market-driven data collection and

digital surveillance in the economically developed world (Delli Carpini, 2019; Milne, 2015). The intersection of these two areas of scholarship has the potential to give us a better understanding of not only how young adults perceive and manage online privacy, but also the cultural and policy implications of data privacy rights.

Methods

Working with two student researchers during the 2018-2019 academic year, we conducted semi-structured interviews of undergraduate college students to collect behavioral and attitudinal data about their online behaviors. Specifically, the interviews focused on how students manage privacy and self-representation online, within a culture of digital surveillance.

Research questions included:

1. To what degree do college students understand contemporary patterns of corporate and governmental surveillance as a part of their online social world?
2. What strategic usage patterns, regarding platforms and information distribution, are impacted by individual level understanding(s) and expressions of the concept of privacy?

The 70 interviews were comprised of college students age 18-22. Participants were 59% women, 37% men, and 4% "other." Additionally, 72% identified as white, and 28% as non-white. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes long, averaging one hour. Data was transcribed, coded, and analyzed to identify narrative patterns.

Findings

The participants of this study live within a complex techno-social environment, shaped by both end-user expectations and profit-driven corporate frameworks. They expressed feelings of connection and intimacy, engaged in interactional social processes, and conformed and resisted social norms. In short, they participated in genuine social interactions and cultural production, online. Yet this environment is situated within a profit-driven data collection and marketing system that provides detailed and comprehensive information to governments, corporate industries, political organizations, and many other interested parties.

Individual experiences and social networks online coexisting within a profit-driven and governmental surveillance marketplace result in complex social norms and individual responses. Due to recent journalistic visibility, participants found themselves to be increasingly informed about the nature of online surveillance and their own position within the system. As with any system, response and management of this information varied, but common themes emerged. Student research participants discussed their use of privacy controls and risk assessment in their self-disclosure. When structural controls were perceived to be inadequate or excessively restricting by the students, the behavioral controls took a rhetorical turn. Participants rationalized their responses to surveillance and privacy, redefining and adapting their perceptions of the concepts to create a positive self-narrative.

This project identified four key patterns:

- Participants are conscious of surveillance online but not always clear who is watching. The audience is generally perceived to be other end-users. While there is an awareness of corporate or governmental surveillance, it is less well understood.
- How participants make sense of surveillance varies. Typical responses include rejecting the idea that surveillance happens to them, the idea that such surveillance is desirable as a form of protection, apathy at the system, or the development of strategies for personal data management.
- Adaptive strategies to online surveillance frequently emerged in which participants engage in strategic self-presentation, platform management and controls, or working within the system.
- Other participants engaged in resistance. Strategies typically take the form of "messing" with the system or withdrawal.

This project found that the greater participants awareness of data collection, the more they desired to manage access to their personal data. Specifically, participants who indicated the highest awareness typically responded with adaptive strategies to online surveillance. These strategies include creating a carefully controlled online identity to fit a particular self-representation narrative, limited posting and sharing of information, or using VPNs and web browser controls to limit data collection. Often, they used a combination. Other participants discussed resistance stratagems to maintain online privacy, but did so with a sense of fatalism, acknowledging them to be largely ineffective with current US public policies.

This qualitative project is limited in scope and is not intended to be perceived as generalizable. However, it does suggest that we are in the midst of a significant cultural transformation around the experience of privacy, and the acceptance of organizational surveillance. Research participants seem to create a conceptual understanding of privacy rooted in the strategic control of information. This transformation is just the latest example of how the internet continues to reshape contemporary culture, online and off. Such transformations must be addressed by scholars and policy makers in order to provide a framework for institutional and governmental bodies.

References

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