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CHOICE AND CONTROL: AN ANALYSIS OF PRIVACY VALUES AND PRIVACY CONTROLS

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Introduction

On February 2, 2021, the encrypted messaging service (and Facebook rival) Signal announced in a tweet that TECNO mobile devices, which include some of the most popular phones in Africa, “enable notifications for Facebook apps like WhatsApp, but block Signal notifications by default.” Users are certainly able to change this default setting, though it requires a four-step process navigating the phone settings. This phone setting is a prime example of how default settings are political. Default selections in technology settings inherently influence users through nudges via the automatic prioritization of options. Signal’s final line in their announcement—“privacy should be the default”—captures the cultural zeitgeist of our moment.

Critical Framework

Specific to settings and choice architecture, scholarship focuses on two key points regarding their social and political implications. First, research on the role of default settings indicates the ability of defaults to influence human behavior, both in the analog and digital world (Bradshaw & DeNardis, 2019; Shah & Kesan, 2008; Shah & Sandvig, 2008; Soh, 2019; Willis, 2013; Zuiderveen Borgesuis, 2015). Second, research shows that most users do not change the default settings (Dinner et al., 2011; Ramokapane et al., 2019; Shah & Sandvig, 2008; Sunstein, 2013; Svirsky, 2019; Watson et al., 2015). These points together suggest that there is incredible and intrinsic, though hidden, power in technology settings, including those set by social media companies. The hidden levers of control embedded within the default settings influence users’ overall experience on platforms and with technology, especially in regard to issues of privacy and security.

Not all users are aware that they can change settings and even if they do, often these settings are so buried into a platform’s interface, it is challenging for users to find and change them (Young & Quan-Haase 2013). Moreover, the knowledge of settings does not necessarily correlate to a user’s ability to find and change these settings, and as

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Ramokapane (2019) identifies, “users attribute their failure to configure default features to hidden controls and insufficient knowledge on how to configure them.” Not only is lack of awareness an issue, but users must navigate often overwhelming settings options that they may not have the digital knowledge skills to understand fully.

Our suggestion that default settings in technology infrastructure and platforms have political and social implications builds upon scholarship from Science and Technology Studies (STS) that examines technological architecture as non-neutral and imbued with political power. Langdon Winner (1980) suggests that technological architecture reflects and reinforces existing power structures. Ruha Benjamin (Benjamin, 2019) expands on Winner’s claims and suggests that “the way we engineer the material world reflects and reinforces (but could also be used to subvert) social hierarchies.” Benjamin points out that the effects of discriminatory design—a component of her concept of default discrimination—are long-lasting and long-reaching and that “Collateral damage, we might say, is part and parcel of discriminatory design.”

Methodology

This paper examines the embedded assumptions and implications of technology and technical design on society. To this end, this study addresses the role and power of social media companies in developing and applying privacy policies and norms for their users. The privacy choices by social media platforms affect billions of users worldwide.

There are multiple locations where social media platforms present and implement their privacy and security policies. Of particular interest to this paper is Facebook, one of the most popular and most commonly studied social media platforms. The dataset for this paper will include three components from each of these platforms: 1. Facebook Newsroom articles on privacy topics (2006-present) 2. Facebook’s privacy policies over the years (accessed via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine) 3. Facebook user-facing privacy controls. As a note, Facebook has transitioned from a privacy policy to a data policy.

For example, Facebook claims that, “We are committed to honoring your privacy choices and protecting your information” (Facebook). This paper proposes an empirical study through textual analysis of how public statements on the core value of privacy and data security align or differ with the actual application of respective privacy policies. Further, this study expands this comparison to include what privacy and security options are available and customizable for users, as well as what privacy controls are offered and how, to determine if these settings align or differ from public statements of privacy values.

Conclusions

This paper offers a comprehensive examination of where and how platforms engage with privacy and data. This study considers how platforms’ public-facing rhetoric aligns or differs with the actual implementation of privacy policies and privacy controls. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of how the implications of this research may have profound impact in the governance, policy, and regulation of platforms. Future research

can extend the sample of this three-fold analysis (news releases, privacy/data policies, and controls) to other popular social media companies such as Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, and Reddit.

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