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WHAT IS PRIVACY LITERACY FOR?

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Networked devices, sensors, and the algorithmic processes that power them pervade nearly all facets of daily life. These systems are designed by an elite class of experts and powered by data extracted from populations of people (Burrell & Fourcade, 2021). Many people remain unaware of what data these systems extract and how systems and institutions use data, raising significant questions about privacy (Arora, 2018; Cohen, 2013). The concern is that such systems are “dedicated to prediction but not necessarily to understanding or to advancing human material, intellectual, and political well-being” (Cohen, 2013, p. 1927).

One response to these concerns is to call for educational efforts that increase people’s understanding, or literacy, of data flows (Kumar et al., 2020; Livingstone et al., 2021; Pangrazio & Selwyn, 2019). Literacy is often regarded as an end itself, an unquestionably good thing. Yet literacy does not operate autonomously. Teaching someone to understand something does not automatically improve their life (Warschauer, 2004). Privacy literacy efforts thus need to be explicit about what they seek to accomplish. In other words, what is privacy literacy for? I begin answering this question by reflecting on the origins of privacy as a concept and linking privacy literacy to critical pedagogy and collective visioning.

The Purpose of Privacy Literacy

Privacy concerns are not unique to datafication. Worries about the death of privacy have persisted for decades “because the modern right to privacy was born out of the conditions of its violation, not its realization” (John & Peters, 2017, p. 293). When U.S. lawyers Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis (1890) declared privacy as “the right to be let alone” (p. 193) in an article credited as the foundation of privacy law, they positioned privacy as a negative right—freedom from something, like intrusion, rather than a positive right—freedom for something, like exercising agency. Their conception of privacy arose from their concerns about people’s ability to use handheld cameras to (sometimes surreptitiously) document candid moments and publicize them in newspapers, potentially embarrassing upper-class society. Privacy is thus inextricably

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tied to changing social and technological circumstances, resulting in “a concept that was broken before it was built” (John & Peters, 2017, p. 294). Broken because it became something to value only in the moment social elites felt they were losing it. Such conditions render privacy as something to defend rather than enjoy. Privacy discourse, with its focus on protecting people from the privacy concerns of new technologies, embodies this defensive posture (Kumar, 2019).

But movements for change cannot just fight *against* something. They must also stand *for* something (The Red Nation, 2021). Legal scholar Julie Cohen (2013) argues that privacy “shelters dynamic, emergent subjectivity from the efforts of commercial and government actors to render individuals and communities fixed, transparent, and predictable” (p. 1905). Privacy gives people the breathing room they need to become themselves (Cohen, 2013). Fights to defend privacy in the face of data extraction are declarations to protect space for human flourishing. **Thus, privacy literacy efforts should harness education to mobilize people toward changing the technological and social conditions that discipline subjects toward advancing institutional goals.**

Putting Privacy Literacy into Praxis

Recall that the right to privacy was born from upper-class anxieties about reputation (Warren & Brandeis, 1890) and centers on a liberal framing of the human as a rational individual (Cohen, 2013). Just as data-driven systems embody colonial relations (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Ricaurte, 2019), privacy research often reproduces colonial worldviews, given that it largely occurs in Western, white, middle-class contexts (Arora, 2018). To avoid perpetuating oppressive power dynamics, privacy literacy efforts should embody a critical pedagogy where teachers and students learn from each other about what privacy means, how data-driven systems do and don’t afford privacy, and what needs to change to create worlds where people can flourish. This education is praxis, a collective, ongoing process of learning from and with each other to “remedy rather than reinforce social inequalities” (Winchell & Kress, 2013, p. 150). For instance, the Our Data Bodies project, grounded in the lived experienced of marginalized residents of three U.S. cities, identifies the myriad ways data-driven systems hold people back, celebrates the strategies people develop to resist such systems, and offers educational materials to support anti-surveillance work (Lewis et al., 2018; Petty et al., 2018).

Movements for change must also offer visions of the worlds they want to bring about. Declarations like the Feminist Data Manifest-No (Cifor et al., 2019) and the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance (Research Data Alliance International Indigenous Data Sovereignty Interest Group, 2019) identify paths away from extraction and toward relations that respect the inherent humanity of data. If privacy literacy’s purpose is to mobilize people toward changing current conditions, these visions can answer questions about what kind of change needs to happen.

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