# REPUTATION, INC.: THE INDUSTRIALIZATION OF DIGITAL SELF PRESENTATION AND ONLINE PRIVACY

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## Introduction

In 2013, citing the release of information by NSA contractor Edward Snowden, Dictionary.com announced *privacy* as its word of the year. That same year, the Oxford Dictionary declared *selfie* its word of the year, noting a 17,000% increase in its use over the previous year. The twin selection of *privacy* and *selfie* as words of the year might feel contradictory. Embedded in the practice of selfie-making is not simply the *capture* of a personal image, but also the *sharing* of that content. In contrast, definitions of privacy tend to reflect freedom from observation. The selections, however, are not as divergent as they initially appear. Rather, they reveal a tension residing at the center of contemporary digital culture: a conflict between social and economic incentives for visibility and an enduring need for the intimacy and autonomy afforded by privacy. The 2013 word of the year choices raise important questions about how a society that is deeply implicated in cultures of self-production and display could also be immensely preoccupied with anxieties of over-exposure. In this paper, I explore this tension to understand the complex and evolving understandings of privacy through the lens of a commercial privacy industry committed to providing individuals with tools to control and benefit from the dissemination of personal information online.

Cultural responses to the introduction of new media technologies, which tend to challenge existing social conventions and boundaries (Marvin, 1990), often manifest as fears about a perceived threat to privacy. Just as the postal service (Henkin, 2006), telephone (Marvin, 1990), and television (Spigel, 1992) raised concerns about the public exposure of intimate information, the internet has generated concerns about the end of privacy (Rosen, 2010). The contested nature of this term has complicated attempts codify meaningful privacy protections. While legal approaches to privacy tend to focus on control – over space, information, or personal reputation – the social meaning of privacy is contextual and varies across time and between communities complicating the notions of control (Nissenbaum, 2010). The result, at least in the United States, has been a piecemeal approach that combines narrow regulation with shared social

expectations.

In the context of a new information environment that lacks both appropriate regulation and shared social norms, a collection of for profit companies has emerged over the past two decades to help support and define personal privacy for the digital age. In the larger project from which this paper draws, I trace the complex and evolving approaches these actors have towards notions of identity construction, authentic self-presentation, visibility, and value creation in an online environment. I this paper, I focus specifically on the role this industry has played in reflecting and shaping the norms that guide contemporary approaches to digital self-presentation. I observe how industrial practices have mobilized and destabilized collectively understood terms, redefining them in ways that reflect the changing economic, social, and political realities of an evolving digital environment. In particular, I examine how this industry has positioned the terms "autonomy" and "authenticity," defining and redefining them at key moments over the past two decades.

## Method

Based on interview with key members of this emergent industry, as well as extensive analyses of industry and policy texts, the paper examines the two-decade evolution of a set of commercial institutions that reside at the intersection of sociality and privacy. I draw here from a broader project that involves interviews with over 25 members of the privacy industry as well as media coverage of key companies spanning the period between 1995 and 2013. Specifically, the research centers around questions regarding comparative industry history, target publics, shared commercial rhetoric, and business practices that will allow me to address larger questions about the social, economic, and political conditions informing the ongoing negotiations between privacy and visibility.

I argue that to understand cultural anxieties about online privacy and the corresponding strategies of self-presentation and reputation management, we must understand the broader industrial forces that reflect and shape these practices. Further, I suggests that a research agenda limited to observing successful actors who command economic and social resources in the digital space misses out on much of the nuance embedded in a complex digital ecosystem. In examining the evolution of the online privacy industry – a task that involves attention to failure as much as to success – this paper follows a group of actors as they intervene in a socio-economic climate that offers growing incentives for visibility to provide individuals with strategies for balancing the risks and rewards of disclosure.

## The Evolution of the Online Privacy Industry

The success and failure of companies at key moments over the first twenty years of the digital privacy industry offers an instructive illustration of the myriad forces contributing to the changing politics of privacy in the emergent medium. With the influx of internet users in the 1990s made possible by the of the introduction of the web browser, fears emerged about how to manage data and identity in this largely unregulated space. While members of the geek and hacker communities had developed strategies for encrypting content and preserving anonymous spaces online, these strategies tended to

be limited to those with advanced coding experience. In the face of ineffective industry self-regulation and limited government intervention, a set of companies emerged to help individuals manage their online visibility and control their digital data flows by privileging tools for anonymity. At the heart of efforts was a desire to empower individuals to protect their personal privacy through simplified tools that would allow users to surf the web anonymously and limit the disclosure of personal information only to trusted actors. These actors viewed anonymous online self-presentation as an important opportunity for authentic self-presentation. Despite the optimism surrounding these companies, few of the actors in this emergent industry weathered the dot-com crash and by 2002 almost all of the companies offering commercial privacy enhancing services had closed shop.

The mid-2000s witnessed the reemergence of privacy enhancing services with a host of new companies offering strategies to help people manage their digital footprint. Similar to their predecessors, these companies rehearse cautionary tales about the potentially harmful implications of online visibility and point to the inequalities of an economic system in which companies claim profits from the collection and use of personal information. However, these companies were facing a vastly different socio-technical reality. While the privacy enhancing services of the 1990s had fought against a digital architecture that privileged identity as the primary source of authentication and privileged opportunities for anonymity, contemporary actors are operating in an environment where users are incentivized at every turn to disclose personal information. Recognizing the value of visibility in this environment, these companies dismiss the viability of anonymity, offering an alternative model of privacy to their predecessors. These companies construct privacy as a tactic of what I call "strategic transparency" – a careful balance between visibility and obscurity – and offer products and services to assist in the creation and management of an online profile aimed at generating social insight and economic capital. Authenticity, for these companies, is achieved through the disclosure of personal information and the cultivation of a compelling digital persona.

## Conclusions

Ultimately, I argue that the reliance on corporate actors to provide privacy protections to an increasingly digital public has supported a cultural construction of privacy as a personal choice. Drawing on ideas of *responsibilization* and *individualization* offered by Ulrich Beck (2002) and Anthony Giddens (1991) in their assessments of the modern risk society, I examine the power of commercially motivated, choice-based architectures to supplant collective fears about the consequences of visibility with narratives about the empowering possibilities of individual decision making. I push back against claims that controlled disclosure, rather than anonymity, is a universally accessible option for obtaining privacy in an environment that privileges visibility. Drawing on critical cultural theory, I examine the politics of visibility and interrogate the assumed privilege embedded in solutions that encourage people to control their personal narrative and information trails.

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