Visibility in Digital Spaces: Controlling Personal Information Online

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Abstract

Individuals are increasingly visible in online spaces. Posting content to social media, browsing websites, and interacting with friends are all acts that render a person visible to other individuals, networks, and corporations. At the same time, these behaviors are being logged, archived, and aggregated in a variety of unexpected and emerging ways. In this panel, we explore the tensions that arise around controlling personal information online. We do so through a series of case studies around lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) identities, children, personal data exchange, and advertising. In each, we consider the politics of visibility around personal, family, social, and community identities, especially in the context of marginalized or scrutinized populations and experiences. We aim to generate debate about appropriate sharing behaviors online and to further an agenda that prioritizes greater control of personal information online.

Author Keywords

Personal information; visibility; identity; social media; control.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

As people share personal information online about themselves and others, controlling that information becomes a significant challenge. In particular, data that are shared in social platforms are inherently interpersonal—people have to decide what is appropriate to share and have to manage how other people view, interact with, or reshare that data. For example, a new mother who posts a photo of her baby on Facebook has to consider not only how she wants to present herself as a mother, but also the long-term implications of sharing personal information about her child. Or, a man who posts to Grindr has to consider not only how he presents himself on Grindr, but also how his decision to participate on Grindr might impact his family or friends or be leveraged by advertisers. In extreme cases, people who choose to join a site such as Ashley Madison—the marriage infidelity site—risk hackers releasing their information to the public.

A central theme in controlling personal information online is the visibility of that information to others. More importantly, visibility is political—the decision to share personal information online is embedded with expectations about what should or should not be shared. For example, the new mother is expected to present an image of a happy baby online [3]; upon doing so she is rewarded with likes and comments. The politics of visibility become especially salient with diverse or marginalized communities [1]: the decision to post online requires that individuals consider identities, audiences, and broader social agendas and movements. This panel will bring together CSCW researchers to discuss and debate the implications of sharing personal information online. Key open questions include:

- How should individuals control information that is shared about them online?
- How do the politics of visibility impact personal information-sharing behaviors?
- How should individuals manage boundaries around sharing personal information?
- What responsibility should companies take on to help manage people's personal information?

We will focus on empirical domains that illustrate the complexities of these questions: individuals who identify as or participate in LGBT communities, parents who share personal information about their children online, system management and evasion in heterogeneous technical environments, and advertising systems. The goal of this panel is for CSCW scholars to discuss the future of social computing systems for supporting control of personal information online, especially in the context of individuals' relationships and visibility in online spaces.

Panelists

Jed R. Brubaker is an Assistant Professor in the department of Information Science at the University of Colorado Boulder. He conducts research in social informatics, social media, and infrastructure studies focusing on how identity is designed, represented, and experienced within socio-technical systems.

Jofish Kaye is a Senior Research Scientist in the Human-Computer Interaction group at Yahoo. He uses quantitative and qualitative data and design to direct innovation and strategic decisions by understanding user needs and practices, and occasionally teaches HCI at Stanford University.

Sarita Schoenebeck is an Assistant Professor in the School of Information at the University of Michigan. She studies and designs social computing systems as they relate to family life. She is interested in the privacy and the identity implications of parents sharing information about their children online.

Janet Vertesi is Assistant Professor in the Sociology Department at Princeton University and advisory board member of the Data and Society Institute in New York City. She studies decision making and sociotechnical systems in planetary science research, with an interest in the relational aspects of data management and exchange.

Panel Structure

This panel will be structured around a series of scenarios that surface complex questions about controlling personal information online. Panelists will give short presentations representing divergent perspectives. Our goal is to enable a conversation about the relationships between people, technology, and data that inform how we conceptualize control of personal information online.

Scenario #1
The desire to control personal information is caught up in the relationships between people, the technology they use, and the broader social context in which technology use is situated. What kinds of communities might have different concerns about how their data is shared? Jed will discuss how communication technologies can be used in powerful ways when organizing and supporting otherwise marginalized communities. The LGBT community, for example, has a long history of using technology to make themselves

"visible." In fact, "visibility" is a primary political strategy through which LGBT civil rights have been pursued. However, LGBT experiences are often ones of invisibility and erasure; as such, it is not surprising that in many cases "control" does not equate to "private." Within technological platforms, issues around personal information extend beyond control and visibility to a consideration of how platforms might acknowledge and affirm one's personal identity and facilitate self-actualization.

Scenario #2
Jofish will discuss the increasingly widespread use of ad blocking technologies, and discuss why and how internet users in the United States, Taiwan and China are using ad blocking tools. What are the potential impacts of ad blocking on the ways we use computers everyday, and what are the implications of these practices for all of us? How do people think about ad blocking and their personal information, and what are the implications of more widespread ad blocker usage on what is generally experienced as a free and open internet? Are there alternatives to blanket acceptance or rejection of advertising?

Scenario #3
The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children highlights children's rights to identity and privacy. Sarita will discuss how children's online identities and privacy are impacted when parents share information about their children online. She will anchor the discussion with questions to the audience, such as: At what age should parents ask their children before posting pictures of them online? Is it okay for parents to make money from documenting their children's lives online? At what age should children be able to gain

control over the information that has been shared about them online? Sarita will discuss related theories about disclosure, boundary management, and privacy as they relate to sharing information about children.

Scenario #4
Janet will discuss examples of data sharing and information management where individuals must work across a variety of platforms, with many relationships at stake. In a heterogeneous environment of media multiplexity [2], individual responsibility for data management and mobility is an essential part of neoliberal selfhood, group membership, and identity management. At the same time, the "networked privacy" [5] model demonstrates that such a task is always necessarily intersubjective.

Across these cases Janet will explore emerging models for our understanding of data work, including relational data mobility [4] and the moral economy of data management. These frameworks not only provide design implications but also reveal how our present systems jeopardize or even violate these careful social practices at the intersection of people and platforms, data and companies, groups and algorithms.

Audience Participation
The issues raised in this discussion are of significant interest to the community, and the topics were chosen in the context of several months of discussion, including on Facebook groups like CSCW Meta, CHI Meta and CHI Women, as well as numerous discussions over email and face to face. In addition to standard audience questions, we will have a publicly accessible moderator site where both present and distant audiences can submit questions and vote existing

questions up and down. This allows for significant audience interaction prior and during the panel, and allows for audience input beyond standard spoken questions.

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