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I finished my PhD in Public Policy and Behavioral Sciences in December 2012, and I am now in my second year post-doc. During my Master's program at the London School of Economics I took 4 core Economics classes (Microeconomics, Macroeconomics, Econometrics and IO), Industrial organization being my focus. During my PhD at Carnegie Mellon, I took courses in Econometrics (e.g., Econometric Theory and Methods, Advanced Econometrics), Economics (e.g., Public Economics, Game Theory Applications), Statistics (e.g., Probability and Mathematical Statistics, Statistical Computing), and some courses for my concentration area (e.g., Privacy in the Digital Age, Behavioral Economics).

I am now a privacy researcher who uses tools from economics and behavioral decision research to study individuals' and firms' online interactions in Web 2.0, and their policy implications. My research focuses on privacy decision making and information sharing, especially on social media; strategic decisions and privacy trade-offs between firms' collection of "big data" and consumers' privacy protection; and the role of regulators and policy makers in the market for information.

I have been working on three main research areas: features of technology affecting willingness to disclose personal information, and their policy implications; the impact of disclosed information on impression formation and person evaluations; personal characteristics and characteristics of the physical environment affecting privacy preferences. Below, I summarize some specific research interests for each of these areas.

How technology affects willingness to disclose

In the absence of government regulation, some features of modern technologies of online social interaction may have unintended effects on willingness to disclose, and are likely to generate difficulties in privacy-related choices. In particular, I studied the unexpected effects of perceived control over personal information, and found that, while control is a necessary element to privacy protection, it may result in riskier disclosure to wider audiences, thus causing higher rather than lower privacy risks (as intended).

Other common, and seemingly inconsequential features of online technologies, such as simple misdirections (e.g., a time delay of a few seconds), privacy policy changes, or the framing given to privacy policy statements, also significantly affect privacy decisions. The main finding from our research is that human limitations, including bounded rationality, limited attention, and psychological biases may be easily exploited by online platforms in order to persuade individuals to disclose more than what they may find optimal, leading to regrets.

I also looked at how modern technologies that can be embedded in an online service, such as geo-location (ability to infer the physical location of the user via IP address or GPS), affect disclosure. I find that privacy concerns are highly raised by geo-location technologies, especially if used by Governmental institutions. This study is part of a larger project in collaboration with the Census Bureau, in an effort to promote online collection of Census data to reduce the costs associated with the decennial census.

Impact of disclosed information on impression formation

Much attention has been revolving around the benefits of “big data.” Part of my research addresses, in a way, a complement aspect of big data – namely, how firms may easily induce individuals to disclose a lot about themselves, and how such disclosures can affect the economic well-being of data subjects and data holders.

Specifically, this stream of research focuses on the long term consequences of disclosure (especially on the Internet) on impression formation and person evaluation. Hypothesizing a differential effect of disclosures with positive and negative valence on impression formation, I found that if disclosed information is perceived as diagnostic of one’s personality, it significantly affects others’ impressions of oneself, regardless of the time it refers to. Thus, negative information such as potentially embarrassing photos uploaded to a social media profile, or adolescent jokes posted to a weblog, have the potential of becoming indelible taints from one’s past. Conversely, positive information, such as personal or professional achievements, fades away very quickly. Such phenomenon may affect public policies of data retention, labor policies, and insurance markets.

I am also interested in the effect of new social norms regarding online disclosures on impression formation. In particular, I challenge the view that since embarrassing, sensitive, at times even self-incriminating disclosures are becoming more and more common, especially on social media, they will soon stop having a significant effect on others’ impressions about oneself. Indeed, I find that such disclosures continue to have a strong effect, both on impressions and on actual behaviors towards the person who disclosed, notwithstanding possibly modified and more relaxed social norms about disclosure.

Personal or environmental characteristics affecting privacy preferences

Privacy concerns are highly affected by external factors that may have not much to do with the particular technology at use. This is evident in physical privacy choices, such as using shutters or curtains for our windows, or closing doors. But is it possible that sensorial stimuli (or lack thereof) from the surrounding physical environment also affect willingness to disclose information online? In a series of experiments, we find that sensorial stimuli, such as proximity to other human beings (as opposed to inanimate objects), visual stimuli (seeing a person as opposed to an inanimate but moving object), auditory stimuli (a phone call versus the sound of a fax machine), and olfactory stimuli (smelling a solution with or without human pheromones) significantly affect the intimacy of disclosure in an online questionnaire.