



Learned Helplessness

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April 17, 2014



Year 2003, Bankrate.com: “If you're like most people, you've heard a lot about online banking but probably haven't tried it yourself.” Today, the small remainder of our lives that isn't already online will be there fairly soon—the currency that's now in our physical wallets, our healthcare records, shopping even for food, and the myriad of communications we use in work and life. This information also is transparent to others. Many third parties know more about us than we know about ourselves, and this group includes random curious strangers, collaborators, co-workers, family, and friends. The challenge for security and privacy is that ordinary people have little idea what others, including friends and family, can learn about them was available online. They do care. They have concerns about their online information, not just to protect against identity attacks but because they wish to control their image and relationships with people in their different social circles. In a recent national survey, a large majority of Internet users said they had tried to hide something they posted or read online [1]. Yet the ordinary person has too little expertise and knowledge to know exactly what to worry about and few ideas (or the wrong ideas) what to do about it. The drawings in the thumbnail sketches above, from a study of how young adults imagine the Internet, typify people's sparse conceptual knowledge of it.

We need research to better understand and serve the goals of ordinary people, and to design future policies for their security and privacy. I offer an anecdote to illustrate how blind we seem to be to these needs. I have lots of friends and students in nontechnical fields who heard about the Heartbleed SSL vulnerability in the news. Following the release, many got email from security administrators admonishing them to “change all your passwords” and “don't re-use the same password. ” But with the number of steps and hours that might have entailed, they did not take this advice. Those who did change a couple of passwords they thought might be sensitive, they received no feedback as to the success or failure of this behavior. (As any behaviorist can tell you, unreinforced behavior tends to be extinguished.)

Research [2] suggests many have developed a form of learned helplessness in the face of vast uncontrollable data about them online. (Learned helplessness is a mental state in which an organism forced to endure aversive stimuli becomes unable or unwilling to avoid subsequent encounters with those stimuli, even if they are escapable, presumably because it has learned that it cannot control the situation [3]) People are still trying various workarounds to keep some of their data private (such as deleting their browser history). But they don't know if these workarounds work, what it means to be anonymous at different levels of the network, or how to hide particular content. We need to give people policies and tools for managing important aspects of their private information and lives, and better ways to exert control.

References:

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3. Seligman, M. E. (1972). Learned helplessness. Annual Review of Medicine, 23, 407-412.