

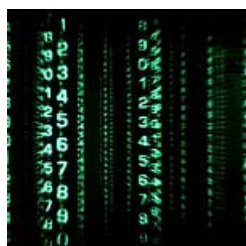
2. Apr. 2014

von Martin

in Security Culture,
Zivilgesellschaft

Kommentare (1)

A Privacy of the Gaps: Privacy isn't thriving online

by *Martin Schmetz*

Stumbling over a [Wired article](#) this morning, which claimed that privacy is, in fact, thriving online, I was ready to dismiss it as another April's fools article. But it turned out that the article was posted a day earlier, and this, as well as its tone, suggest that the author, Nathan Jurgenson, was being serious. Needless to say, I disagree with his assessment – privacy was in danger

on the Internet before, and it continues to be.

Jurgenson's line of reasoning is encapsulated in one short paragraph:

“

“But a human life is not a database, nor is privacy the mere act of keeping data about ourselves hidden. In reality, privacy operates not like a door that's kept either open or closed but like a fan dance, a seductive game of reveal and conceal.”

I believe this premise is flawed in several ways. First of all, it doesn't fit the actual **definition** of privacy. Privacy is, according to dictionary definition, “the state of being away from public attention”. Intuitively, this makes sense – it's also how we use the word in everyday language, for example when we're talking about the “privacy of our own home”. Allowing smaller or larger glimpses into our lives online through social media, then, means stepping outside of that privacy. Sharing things with everybody, or at least a circle of people larger than your immediate family or a select few friends, means making it public.

The article even admits as much, when it talks about users taking precautions about what they share online. Obviously, they are well aware of the implications of sharing information on social networks, and the fact that this no longer constitutes a private space.

The second problem with this is the fact that government agencies, as well as companies, do in fact threaten individual privacy. The article mentions this offhand, but the focus here seems to be on privacy as defined through user actions, and user actions only. The fact that simply using the Internet, never mind social media, leaves enough of a data trail to be readily identifiable by large actors way beyond any individual user's control is ignored. But, especially after the Snowden revelations, it certainly is on the minds of many

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users. And, as long as they use the Internet at all, there is very little they can do to prevent this from happening. From that perspective, the individual has lost control of their privacy, unless they choose to withdraw from modern society completely. This seems obviously unrealistic. Certainly, there is no graceful fan dancing involved.



Say goodbye to your privacy, pal.

The core of the issue is that privacy is a relational concept, whereas Jurgenson seems to present privacy primarily as something the individual decides to keep or give up. This is true, to an extent, but privacy is also granted by others. And as it is right now, it is not granted by government agencies or most companies. It is often also not granted by friends involuntarily – even if I don't want pictures of myself on a social media platform, as soon as I attend any social event, chances are that I will end up on it anyway. Of course there are also cases of deliberate stalking, harassing and the infamous nude picture leaks. In other cases, individual data simply ends up in the public realm through hacks or larger scale leaks. And this data was collected not necessarily with the individual's agreement. To Jurgenson, none of this seems to matter – privacy is mainly the tantalizing bits that we choose to leave out when we present ourselves online.

But trying to establish the concept of privacy through omission seems disingenuous at best. What we end up with is not a privacy that is agreed upon and respected by the larger community and its values. The result is a privacy **of the gaps**, with limited to no individual control over most of its aspects. And the gaps are getting ever smaller, whether we agreed to it or not. But because not everything is immediately public, obviously there must be privacy.

Privacy is not dead, but it is in danger – because so far, we have not managed to create rules all (or at least most) actors online agree upon and respect as to what privacy actually is. Right now, privacy online is a lot closer to the little that you manage to hide, either through luck, omission or outright lies. And that's a pretty bleak version of privacy, if one can even call it that.

Nobody is claiming that publicity is killing privacy, and yes, in a way they are indeed two sides of the same coin. What is killing privacy, however, is

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uncontrolled publicity, and the lack of rules on what privacy and publicity actually constitute. It's high time we realize this and set about trying to define how privacy and publicity interact. Right now, privacy certainly isn't thriving online, in fact, not even a larger discourse on it really is. Let's at least start with that.

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
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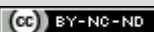
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