Incognito Online: Why and How People Hide Their Information

Abstract: The communication landscape online has changed significantly from the early days of the Internet. In most developed countries, people are constantly connected through the Internet to almost everyone else in their lives everywhere they go. The Internet makes their lives more convenient, but unintentional exposure of personal information to unexpected audiences can cause emotional and tangible damage. My thesis investigates the circumstances under which people hide their information online, their motivations, and how they do so.

My findings show that many people who use the Internet, at least sometimes, want to hide their identity, content, or interactions from threats to their informational and social privacy. I used interviews, surveys, and online experiments to examine various factors that influence people’s intentions and decisions to protect their privacy online. People’s technical knowledge background and awareness of personal information access have mixed effects on their behavioral intentions. My results show that an increased awareness of social privacy threats leads to a higher intention to take privacy protection actions, but this intention may not always translate into actual disclosure behavior.

This work provides implications for future design and research related to Internet privacy. The findings indicate that a higher level of system transparency or more user education might not be effective in influencing people to take more secure online action. The findings suggest we need more research effort to improve policies and systems that can protect users’ privacy and security online without undue reliance on their own behavior.

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