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Living with digital infrastructures: Shaping the data disclosure practices of consumers

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Abstract:

When we use any type of digital platform – music streaming services, train ticket bookings, dating apps, e-stores – our digital traces are collected, stored, analyzed and used to classify us and our actions. While consumers commonly express concern over the commercial surveillance they are subjected to, studies have repeatedly shown that the majority of consumers take few measures to prevent companies' data collection practices. This is known as the privacy paradox.

To date, a number of different explanations for its existence have been proposed. One of the more prevailing explanations is that the privacy paradox is the result of a cost-benefit trade off. It is the result of what is termed the privacy calculus: consumers find the benefits received to be greater than the cost of providing personal information, which can involve both the work of providing it (if not automated) as well as the loss of personal privacy.

Other stress that consumer privacy concerns and consumer values vary across consumers and lead to the development of different attitudes towards consumer surveillance that influence consumer disclosure behavior (Plangger & Montecchi, 2020). When consumers are concerned for their privacy, they will not consider tradeoffs. Conversely, when consumers are unconcerned for privacy but interested in consumer value, assurances of additional privacy will not motivate them to disclose more information, only additional value offered will. Finally, for consumers who are unconcerned with both consumer privacy and value, external factors are more likely to shape disclosure behavior. This means that while the rational calculation and balancing of benefits is something we will see among some consumers, it is not to be expected among all consumers (Plangger & Montecchi, 2020).

However, in both of these explanations, and others like them, the consumer is assumed to be a rational actor and autonomous decision-maker. Consumers calculate and interpret the situation and then choose to grant permission to their personal data, either because they deem the benefits greater than the cost or because they trust the actor that has requested the information.

Based on this view of consumers as rational autonomous decision-makers, consumers are also assigned the responsibility of coming to terms with the problematic privacy situation. According to these scholars, it is up to consumers to understand what they are granting permission to and to whom they are granting this permission (Norberg, Horne, & Horne, 2007). Informed consumers making better decisions is from this perspective the only effective way to address the personal privacy infringements that we are now seeing.

In this paper, we challenge this view of the consumer as a rational and autonomous decision-maker and offer a competing explanation as to why consumers continue sharing their data in spite having concerns regarding digital platforms data collection practices. Making use of the infrastructures of consumption literature, we propose that the digital platforms used by consumers in everyday life have gained infrastructural properties and that this, in turn, shapes the ways that consumers approach data collecting practices.

Drawing on ethnographic interviews with 17 Swedish consumers, we show that because digital platforms have become infrastructures – large and complex socio-technical arrangements, distributed across time-space, intertwined and supporting key everyday practices – consumers are not fully able to comprehend the surveillance they are subjected to, evaluate its consequences, or capable to significantly change their practices to avoid data collection.

Because of this, consumers' agency in regards to data disclosure practices is circumvented by the data collecting digital infrastructures that they interact with. Consumers (1) trade their data – thus accepting the transaction view – (2) normalize data collection – contributing to its legitimation by arguing for its inevitability or necessity – (3) reconfigure data collection practices – making small often insignificant changes to their data practices – or (4) resist data collection – developing more ambitious anti-programs that challenge the logic and operations of data collecting platforms.

Consequently, we argue that while consumers indeed do develop practical strategies to manage the platforms data collecting practices, these strategies are not the result of rational decision-making processes. Instead, these data disclosure strategies are the outcome of socio-technical agencing processes (Fuentes & Sörum, 2019) in which consumers capacity to act in relation to data collection practices is both enabled and delimited by the digital platforms involved.

We end the paper by discussing what this means both for retailers – who design and are part of the digital market infrastructures influencing consumer data disclosure practices – and consumers whose actions are both enabled and shaped by these digital platforms and their data collection practices.

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