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Who Cares about Privacy Online?

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Privacy advocates argue that websites are capable of automatically compiling copious amounts of information on individuals without their knowledge. As data are collected and used without the user's knowledge, privacy is increasingly threatened. Others have questioned some privacy concerns, arguing that alarmists do not understand the limited value of data collected for particular applications.

Despite such debates, governments have begun to develop regulatory measures to address internet-created dangers to privacy. One response is the EU's General Data Protection Regulation, which requires individuals give permission for their data to be collected. In addition, the GDPR grants rights such as the right "to be forgotten", the ability to have personal data removed from a database. To protect privacy, the GDPR assumes an omni-capable citizen, one who has the knowledge, resources, and time to protect their privacy online.

While policymakers pass legislation to grant privacy rights to citizens, the extent to which citizens share their concerns is unclear. To what extent are people concerned and willing to act to protect their data online? This paper is based on the quantitative analysis of survey research and explores the enigma surrounding privacy attitudes and actions.

The first part of the paper explores the levels of concern over digital privacy and whether the attitudes are related to the demographic characteristics of the individual. The second part of the paper discusses the “privacy paradox” – the inconsistency of attitudes towards privacy and privacy behavior. Using logistic regression analysis, we examine how concern over privacy relates to whether people actively protect their personal information online.

Our analyses use data collected for the Oxford Internet Survey (OxIS), a representative sample of the British population. Surveys were completed in 2009, 2011 and 2013. Most of our analyses use the most recent wave which was completed in 2019. The dependent variable is responses to whether individuals believe that “Use of computers & the Internet threatens personal privacy”. Response categories were a 5-category Likert scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”.

OxIS data shows that concern over privacy has increased by about 10 percentage points in the past decade. Between 2009 and 2019 the share of respondents who “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that internet is a threat to privacy rose from 45% to 55%

In the second part of the paper considers the relationship between privacy concern and privacy-related behavior. There are significant associations between perceiving internet as a threat to privacy and taking steps to keep private age, relationship status, medical condition, and shopping habits . However, privacy concerns do not seem to move individuals to take steps to protect their contact details.

These preliminary findings show that individuals are increasingly concerned with their privacy online. Those worried about their privacy tend to take steps to secure some pieces of personal information but not all personal data. On one hand, taking preventative measures might have an inverse effect on privacy attitudes – those taking steps to secure their privacy feel less concerned. On the other hand, several preventative measures seem to have no association with privacy concerns. While digital privacy concern is growing, the relationship between concern and behavior is not clear. The findings suggest rethinking existing privacy legislation. As individuals are inconsistent with attitude and behavior, the assumption of an omniscient citizen is unrealistic.