Online tracking by social network sites: is there any hope after all?
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Users’ online movements can be tracked and recorded by numerous third party sites including advertisers, data aggregators as well as major social network sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, Twitter and Google (Sar & Al-Saggaf, 2013c). The tracking by SNSs appears to be worrisome because SNSs are able to acquire information about their users’ online activities in addition to personal information voluntarily provided by them. Cambodian participants, interviewed by the researcher, were not happy with the tracking and expressed concerns over privacy loss. From the perspective of Contextual Integrity (Sar & Al-Saggaf, 2013a) and its decision heuristic (Sar & Al-Saggaf, 2013b), the tracking by SNSs violates users’ right to privacy because this is happening without users’ awareness and informed consent. Based on these findings, this paper discusses some existing and future measures that can be used to bring the change to the current issues of online tracking by SNSs.

The first aspect to be discussed is protection at the browser level such as regularly cleaning cookies and browsing histories, and using browser extensions in order to reduce the chance of tracking. Existing extensions such as AdBlock (Palant, 2013) and Ghostery (Ghostery, 2013) can be used to remove or block extraneous contents such as advertisements on the first party site pages, whereas Priv3 extension can protect users from the tracking by social network sites if users do not interact with those sites (Priv3, 2012). Unfortunately, these tools did not prove to be an effective solution to the problem because, for one reason, they did not completely eliminate the tracking (particularly by SNSs) and second, not many users are aware of online tracking, let alone of these tools (Krishnamurthy & Wills, 2006).

The second aspect to be considered is users’ awareness and informed consent. As discussed in (Sar & Al-Saggaf, 2013b), the tracking violates users’ right to privacy because SNSs failed to get their informed consent. In order to make an informed choice, users must know all the details involved in the information collection such as who have access to what information about them and how their information is processed or used once collected (Barocas & Nissenbaum, 2009; Krishnamurthy, 2013). However, online users are from different countries, background and cultures, and speak different languages other than English. Therefore, getting informed consent from online users worldwide and raising awareness about online tracking and precaution could be a hard work. Let us assume that users are aware of all of online tracking, and some users are enjoying targeted advertisements on their SNS profiles while some do not wish to be tracked (McDonald & Cranor, 2010a). Will SNS users be able to opt out of tracking by SNSs while still enjoying their online browsing?

A further aspect to be discussed is the involvement from related sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Google. It appears that they hold the power to make changes because they have control on the systems, and they understand the economic values of online tracking (Krishnamurthy, 2010; Gill et al., 2013). One possible option is those organisations can start to think ethnically by applying ethical guidelines or frameworks before making any decision to avoid negative impacts on the others involved in the business - e.g., online users and their privacy. However, eliminating online tracking can result up to 75% drop of advertising revenue for major players.
like Google and Facebook (Gill et al., 2013), and this obviously affects advertising ecosystem as well as business trends. Are they willing to do this?

Another aspect to be discussed is the contribution from researchers across different fields under the interest of ICTs (e.g., technical, social, and philosophical) and the role of the media. Technical accounts of privacy report on the technical flaws that may impinge users’ right (e.g., Krishnamurthy and Wills (2010); Humphreys, Gill, and Krishnamurthy (2010); Mayer (2011)) but do not explain why privacy matters whereas philosophical accounts of privacy (e.g., Moor (1997); Floridi (2005); Nissenbaum (2010); Tavani and Moor (2001)) are not empirically based. Meanwhile, the findings from social aspect of research that involved users’ perspectives are also crucial to report on users’ awareness and perception on how they manage their privacy online (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; McDonald & Cranor, 2010b; Al-Saggaf, 2011). However, findings from different disciplines usually contain area-specific jargons that may be hard to understand among general audience or audience whose native language is not English. An option taken into consideration could be the simplification of language in reports and findings. In addition, a collaboration among researchers from these areas would be efficient in pointing out the technical flaws while also explaining how they may impinge on users’ privacy, and while also reporting on users’ awareness and concern over those flaws.

However, despite the facts that many researchers have contributed large amount of works into the area of online tracking, the findings are usually ignored by the publicity; hence the tracking is still happening and keep growing Krishnamurthy (2010). However, a Wall Street Journal article (Steel & Vascellaro, 2010) caused public breakouts and eventually triggered the response from Facebook founder about various privacy issues. Hence, both the researchers in ICTs and the media are seen to be effective in bringing the publicity’s attention to the any issues brought by the technology and cause the change or response from the involved organisation like Facebook.

Last but not least, another aspect to be considered is the involvement from governments in designing and imposing policies and laws regarding the collection and secondary use of users’ information. Privacy commissioner in Canada as well as the European Union, for example, have been concerned about privacy online and there is also a new proposed law that require first party sites to receive consent before placing a cookie on a user’s computer in the European Union (Krishnamurthy, 2010). Again, this could be challenging because different cultures may hold different views regarding importance and value of privacy. Although Cambodian participants expressed concern over privacy loss from online tracking, comprehensive data protection or privacy law does not exist in Cambodia (Anonymous, 2012); hence, there is no restriction on data collected online.

Based on the rationales above, neither a single measure proves to work. For the changes to occur, it requires an on-going and long-lasting collaboration and involvements among different community of interests such as the first and third party sites, online users, ICT researchers across different fields (e.g., technical, social and philosophical) who may discover the issues overlooked by the responsible organisations, the media that helps to spread the words, and the government who holds the power to impose the laws and rules.

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