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Why Do Consumers Disclose Sensitive Information to Shady-Looking Websites?



Journals Division

Many consumers need help recognizing when their privacy is compromised, according to a new study in the [*Journal of Consumer Research*](#).

“How can we make sense of the contradictory attitudes that individuals display toward privacy—from the seemingly reckless willingness of some to post personal and even incriminating information on social network sites, to the concern people express over the range of information being collected about them and the way it’s being used?” write authors Leslie K. John, Alessandro Acquisti, and George Loewenstein (all Carnegie Mellon University).

The researchers found that cues give rise to different levels of disclosure across situations. For example, in their first experiment, visitors to the New York Times website were asked either directly or indirectly whether they had cheated on their taxes. Twenty-one percent admitted to cheating when they were asked indirectly, versus 12.9 percent who were asked directly.

In subsequent experiments, participants were asked whether they had engaged in a series of different behaviors. Some participants answered a survey on a website that was intentionally made to look unprofessional, with a header that asked “**How BAD Are U???**” in a red font next to a cartoon devil logo. Others answered the same survey on a website that billed it as “Carnegie Mellon University Executive Council Survey on Ethical Behaviors” next to the university crest. “People were more willing to divulge sensitive information when the survey was administered on an unprofessional-looking website,” the authors write.

The authors found that they could cue participants to become more aware of privacy issues. People who completed a photo-identification task that asked them to identify phishing emails (designed to lure recipients into revealing information such as passwords) were less likely to disclose sensitive information in the next experiment.

“People seem naturally comfortable disclosing personal information on unprofessional websites—which are arguably more likely to misuse it,” the authors write. “The present research raises issues about people’s ability to navigate these complexities in a self-interested fashion.”

Leslie K. John, Alessandro Acquisti, and George Loewenstein. “Strangers on a Plane: Context-dependent Willingness to Divulge Sensitive Information.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: February 2011. A preprint of this article (to be officially published online soon) can be found at <http://journals.uchicago.edu/jcr>.

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