

“Privacy in Context”

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Abstract

Privacy is one of most urgent issues associated with information technology and digital media. It is a difficult concept and poorly understood even by people in government and the private sector who set key policies for dealing with and protecting personal information. As all of us have become increasingly aware of the myriad technologies that gather and disseminate information, we are often bullied into thinking we ought not object, either because it is the inevitable march of technological progress (and we are being “old-fashioned”) or because surveillance and massive record keeping are needed for critical societal functions, especially security (and we are being selfish.) Thus, we resign ourselves to giving privacy to those who collect information in the blind faith, that if some personal information is a good thing, more must be better.

The framework of contextual integrity, which I present in my talk, critically appraises this state-of-affairs. It offers an account of privacy that acknowledges the importance of information to constructive engagement with other people, institutions, and organizations but insists that information be shared in appropriate ways. Contextual integrity tells us what appropriate sharing amounts to. It does not prescribe shutting off access, nor investing individuals with absolute control over information about themselves. Instead, it draws attention to norms governing the flow of information entrenched in distinctive realms of social life – education, family, workplace, citizenship, healthcare, etc. In the rush to adopt surveillance technologies, these norms are often thoughtlessly violated. The result may be harm to individuals but it may also place in jeopardy the integrity of social life itself.

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