Privacy top concern as users customize, personalize online experiences

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Although many Internet services and sites allow customization and personalization that make visits online more efficient and enjoyable, two recent studies found that privacy concerns limit how both the most technology-savvy users and those with less expertise utilize opportunities to customize or personalize their online experiences.

Results of the research by Penn State Distinguished Professor S. Shyam Sundar and Sampada S. Marathe of the Media Effects Laboratory in the College of Communications appear in the current issue of Human Communication Research.

For purposes of the study, researchers differentiated between "customization" as a more proactive, highly user-driven practice and "personalization," which could be accomplished in both covert and overt means with a system designed to tailor content for users without active user input.

In the first study, researchers discovered that "power users," those with more of a comfort level with technology and an interest in controlling their experiences, found their visits to an online news site more enjoyable when they could customize the search process by defining search parameters or making changes to a website's settings themselves.

Conversely, "nonpower users," those less comfortable with technology or willing to take advantage of a more convenient approach, enjoyed a personalized experience the most. Under those parameters, the site

shaped the news it provided without any overt control by the users themselves. News provided was based on user behaviors while browsing and searching during a previous visit.

"It was quite remarkable that study participants were so reactive to the subtle and covert manipulation of personalization," Sundar said. "Simply altering the menu of news items to match user interests -- based on just one previous session with the site -- appears to be enough to induce a strong sense of personalization, with psychological consequences.

"When supplied with news items tailored to their interests, lay users tend to rate the stories as having superior journalistic quality compared with news items that are not tailored to their interests, whereas power users tend not to be particularly impressed. Power users are likely to be intimately aware of privacy issues and could be wary of sites tailoring content for them, preferring instead to do it themselves. For them, it is not simply about relevance of content but rather about how that content was generated."

Privacy was the focus of the second study, which built on the first, and both groups of users altered their online behavior when privacy was a concern.

As part of the second study, users were notified that the [news site](#) they visited either "may use" or "will not use" their browsing information to provide services they requested. This subtle difference in notification resulted in dramatic changes in user behaviors.

Specifically, in the high privacy environment, power users were more willing to cede control and have information tailored for them because they trusted the site and appreciated the convenience. In a lower privacy setting, those same users wanted more control.

Nonpower users were more conscious and cautious of their browsing efforts in lower privacy situations. They were more likely to self monitor their news consumption and limit their online exploration as a result. But, they prefer content customized by them over that personalized by the system when assured privacy.

"Privacy turns out to be a key predictor of user attitudes toward personalization and customization, with clear implications for site and system design," Sundar said. "Interfaces have to feature different types or levels of customization for users with different levels of expertise."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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