New study shows surprising risk created by access to personal information online

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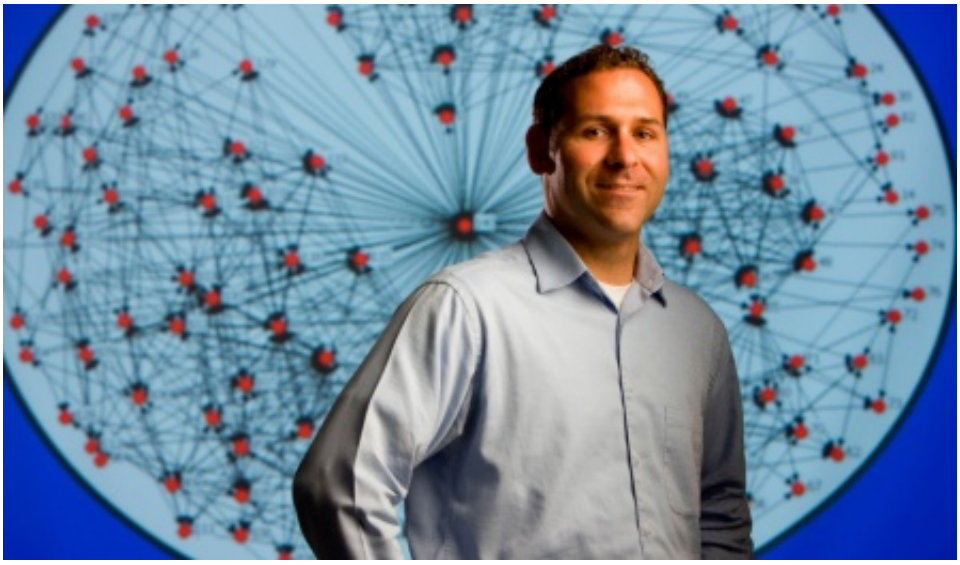

The research of UB communication professor Michael Stefanone is helping us better understand how our personal information can be leveraged by individuals motivated by personal gain.

Access to routine information about you—like where you grew up and your relationship status—can help others manipulate you, according to a recent study by a University at Buffalo research team.

"Just having access to profile information increases their success rate, even when the information is not explicitly being used," says UB communication professor Michael Stefanone, one of the researchers.

The findings demonstrate a surprising risk created by easy access to basic profile information online, he says.

The study published in the latest edition of Information, Communication & Society sought to understand how personal information could be leveraged by individuals motivated by personal gain. Search engines and social networking sites use information about visitors to attract advertisers, but could individuals interacting online benefit from having that same information?

The answer is overwhelmingly, yes.

When strangers meet, those with personal information about the other have an advantage. Knowing someone's relationship status, political affiliation and entertainment preferences allows them to create perceived similarities during conversations with unsuspecting others.

"Lying would seem to be the most direct strategy," Stefanone says. "If I know you're from this hometown, I might lie by saying that I am too. We like people we think are similar to us. But we found that people don't explicitly use the information in conversations."

The approach that surfaced in this study—where subjects asked a stranger during a 10-minute online chat for a personal favor—was more subtle.

The favor, incidentally, was in violation of the stated rules of the experiment.

Two groups participated in the study. In the control group, conversation partners didn't know anything about each other. The manipulators in this group had a 9 percent success rate getting their conversation partner to comply. In the experimental condition where manipulators were given

profile information about their partner ahead of time, that rate increased to 42 percent for the group with personal information.

"That's a big statistical difference," says Stefanone. "Our experimental group was four times as likely to succeed as the control group, but analyzing the conversations revealed that those who had the information about their partner never explicitly used it. That profile information wasn't part of the conversation."

Stefanone says language style was the difference that led to success.

"The more successful group was using inclusive language like 'we' not 'I' or 'you,' he says. "That's what predicated compliance."

There is still a lot the researchers don't know. It's possible that having information about their partners put subjects at ease or put them in what they felt was a privileged position, Stefanone says.

"What we do know from this study is that having information changed the style of interaction," he says. "We're going to run it again to answer some of the questions that were raised here."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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