

Privacy, Economics and Behaviors

A Global Conversation with Alessandro Acquisti

On the 20th of December, the Global Governance students had the pleasure to listen to Alessandro Acquisti, a professor of Information, Technology and Public Policy at the Heinz College, Carnegie Mellon University.

He entertained us first with an interesting speech and after with a debate on Privacy, Economic and Behavior. He needed only two hours to give us a broad overview on the role and mutations of privacy in the last centuries of our society.

Professor Acquisti had the capacity to link Privacy to Economy, underlying the increasing relevance of the former in market economies but also in international relations, as we have seen different privacy standards around the world (e.g. USA and EU).

We have talked at national and international level, but also at an individual one, focusing on the importance assumed by Internet since 1999 and how privacy became more and more important, ending with the born of Facebook, when there have been new privacy concerns.

He dwelled on an everyday paradox, "why people claim against social media lack of privacy but then share every part of their life?"

The professor explained us how he tried and successfully answered that triggering question using social experiment.

At first, Professor Acquisti gave us a broad definition of privacy: stating that it is something that we want to keep secret or protected from the knowledge of other people, it is a limit we put that cannot be overcome by others, and it can be the amount of data that represents us as individuals. In other words, privacy means solitude, seclusion, right to be left alone, control over personal information, obscurity and confidentiality. In 1890, in the paper "The Right to Privacy" by Warren and Brandeis, the authors defined privacy as the right to be left alone. Nevertheless, in 1981, Richard A. Posner stated that if privacy equals the will to protect personal information, this means that if someone wants privacy it is may be because there are negative information that the subject wants to hide, because if there are positive information a person will tend to share them with others.

Another important aspect of nowadays privacy concerns is that with the fact that you reveal a lot about your person, merchants and online social platforms will be able to recognize your preferences and will show you only the advertisements that you are supposed to like.

In addition, professor Acquisti shared with us the conception that privacy is not a novelty for humanity, in fact, evidence of it could be found everywhere in history, from the Ancients Rome and Greece to Java, and from the Torah to the Bible, arriving to the most extreme statements by stating that privacy could be a biological perspective in order to protect themselves, giving us the example that also pets search for privacy.

In order to stress the hypothesis that there could be something biological, in other words physical, that can affect privacy concerns, professor Acquisti presented us some researches done at the University of Carnegie. They simulated the presence of a human being (with a recorded registration for example) close to a person answering to private questions. Those people used to share less private information than others that answered the questions in an empty room.

People are inclined to reveal to less private information just because they have a ventilator in front of them.

A privacy protection mechanism entered into force in their behaviors under the test. Unfortunately, those stimuli that we can perceive in the presence of another human being around us, which can be interested on some peculiarities of our own personality, are lost in the cyberspace and that is the remarkable problem in those days is impossible to solve in the field of online privacy.

The thesis of the professor is that in some way we feel safer behind a computer, probably thanks to the de-personification and inorganicity of that object.

In this regard, a dichotomy is created: by not dealing with the outer world people are just concerned with what are posting online with their friends, however, people feels the psychological reward given by the immediate gratification that a like could give and that is important for our brain.

This happens because of some problems: one of the firsts is that people do not care and that they love to share and gets benefits from sharing, people do not keep in mind the cost benefit analysis of sharing personal information, furthermore there is a contradiction between the generic attitude of caring for privacy and the specific behavior of posting online. Since there is asymmetric information on the matter, privacy costs could be: or very dramatic but with a low probability to have them, or very low costs but with a very high occurrence in time (spam is an example), the latter is the mostly used since in the end, if you unite all the costs together those will be very high for data collectors.

We feel safe behind a computer. The fact that there is no human presence while we post photo online makes us feel detached from it, the "likes" received from our pictures gave us psychological strength.

We are constantly pushed to do so, maybe because is one of the inevitable peculiarities of the future, but also because we tend to ignore privacy policy and long run consequences of them.

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