Public Policy and HCI in the Interest of the Consumer: Privacy, Security and Online Marketing Challenges

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Public policy initiatives are frequently struggling to find the right balance between helping the consumer, on the one hand, and relying on her personal responsibility, on the other hand. Even worse, consumers are often too easily dismissed as “the ignorant, the unthinking and the credulous”, or to have incentives which are incompatible with basic consumer protection ideals; for example, because they just “do not care about privacy”. An important part of the puzzle is an incomplete understanding of consumers’ preferences, actions and abilities in the context of complex decision-making scenarios.

Over the last ten years, I have provided the research and public policy community with studies that document consumers’ attitudes and behaviors, and situate the findings in the context of the many tussles that have manifested themselves around privacy, security and online marketing. Predominantly, I am addressing these issues from the viewpoint of behavioral economics by utilizing experimental strategies borrowed from psychology and computer-human interaction. I complement these studies with formal models of decision-making that provide an important baseline for my behavioral work.

My public policy involvement has led me to testify at and to participate in activities of important US-based institutions such as the Federal Trade Commission, the National Science Foundation, the National Science and Technology Council/White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA ISAT). In Europe, I have contributed to a cybersecurity study authorized by the European Commission which was managed by the European Network and Information Security Agency (ENISA). Over the last two summers, I was invited as a visiting professor by the Swiss National Science Foundation and the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) to work on challenges in the context of online advertisement including proposals for do-not-track.

At the workshop, I would like to expand on my work in the area of “notice & consent”, in particular, with a focus on challenging environments such as online social networks and mobile computing. In my opinion, it is one of the most instructive areas if the goal is to observe the back-and-forth about novel proposals driven by industry self-regulation, academic progress (especially by HCI researchers), and/or public policy objectives.

Specific hurdles to provide consumers with effective and meaningful notice and consent exist in abundance (and have been documented by several HCI researchers), but in absence of a viable game-changing alternative the topic does not lose importance, and continues to attract my attention. In particular, the interaction between HCI researchers and the public policy community is important to further define plausible objectives and meaningful metrics for notice and consent that account for the ever-increasing demands on users’ attention, and complex challenges such as habituation.