The Brookings Institute recently released a study on what it terms the Privacy Paradox [1], which argues that our concerns about privacy are not monolithic, but contextual.

What does that mean? For illustration, they use the experience of an adolescent male purchasing condoms. Having had to do so in a time when condoms were behind the counter, I can concur that privacy and its accompanying embarrassment were key concerns as I waited until there was a male pharmacist at the counter.

To find out how that impacts product purchases, Benjamin Wittes and Emma Kohse used Google surveys to ask about buying behavior for products where there might be privacy concerns e.g. condoms, tampons, 50 Shades of Grey and a “personal massager”, paired with less sensitive products like dental floss, general household items, and The Hunger Games. The results were mixed and more qualitative than quantitative. They concluded:

“Cumulatively, the results show that in their behavior, individuals, at least some of the time, prioritize privacy from those around them over privacy from the remote companies that collect data on us and, indeed, a preference for facilitating highly local privacy at the expense of privacy from remote data-collectors.

These results thus support a conclusion that privacy is, in fact, a highly contextual value—that it is not enough to talk about protecting individual privacy interests, but
that the question of privacy from whom pervasively deserves more attention than it tends to garner in today’s conversations."

Not a lot of help, really, but for me the value of the paper is causing me to re-examine my definition of privacy. Privacy involves protecting information from others to protect me. Some information, such as birth date or social security number, are inherently values neutral, but in the context of an internet geared toward sales, may result in financial harm if exposed. While we readily share with some faceless on-line presence, the contextual privacy concern is about who has access. Indeed, most public discussion of privacy revolves around who has access. Even highly sensitive medical information, e.g. HIV status or a pre-existing condition, is framed as an access issue - sharing with our physicians is okay, but when shared with insurance companies or the government may result in harm, even if the damage consists of mere disclosure of the HIV status or pre-existing condition.

It is the contextual quality associated with who gets access to our private information that I thought was insightful. The authors report on work done by Rebecca Lipman [2] who separates sensitive from non-sensitive information suggesting that individuals prefer to keep their ‘sensitive’ data protected from ‘family members, neighbors, and storekeepers.” Why? When we violate social norms and that behavior is exposed most of us experience at least some mild embarrassment. When I bought condoms that were behind the counter, I waited until a man could wait on me, but if the man was a friend of my parents, I wouldn’t have bought them at all.

Given a violation of a more dominant social norm, say shoplifting, we may (well, should) experience shame. Privacy’s other dimension involves withholding information from others to protect a social image, either to myself or the community I inhabit. These are privacy concerns that result from embarrassment, and they are not the same as concerns about access. Viewing pornography or even how we voted in this last election are privacy concerns that prioritize privacy’s social function.

The takeaway is that privacy is multi-faceted and entangles choices about who knows, with how that information impacts my social image for myself and within my community. We share differently with anonymous companies than we do with our family and friends. And it is not always the case that we share more with family. Privacy’s role in protecting our social image is an old societal concern. Technology, as it does with much of our cultural norms, amplifies our local concerns to a much wider audience.

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