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9 October 2021

How Privacy Vanishes Online

The author, Steve Lohr, argues in his New York Times article that privacy no longer exists in the internet age. He argues this by discussing how security researchers can discover the sexual identity of people through Facebook, how Netflix has been able to improve its recommendation algorithm, how personal information can be found on social media without the owner revealing it themselves, and how some researchers have been able to reverse engineer social security numbers.

The author begins by discussing how security researchers can discover the sexual identity of people through Facebook. The researchers did this by analyzing Facebook profiles and applying powerful data mining and statistics to the data (Lohr). With this, the researchers were able to predict with a 78% accuracy if the profile belonged to a gay male (Lohr). This shows the astonishing powers that data mining has when someone has access to a massive dataset like Facebook.

He then continues by discussing how Netflix has been able to improve its recommendation algorithm. Netflix managed this accomplishment when a team of computer scientists and statisticians were able to improve the algorithm by at least 10% after being given anonymized movie rental history of their subscribers (Lohr). This shows that even anonymized data can be deanonymized through the analysis of a user’s rating and recommendation habits (Lohr).

Lohr continues by discussing how personal information can be found on social media without the owner revealing it themselves. Even if users are carefully protecting their personal information on social media, the information can often still be found due to friends, colleagues, etc. unintentionally revealing that data (Lohr). Researchers were able to identify more than 30% of users from Twitter and Flickr by analyzing information from accounts stripped of identifying information and building the structure of individual’s social networks (Lohr).

Finally, the author discusses how researchers have been able to reverse engineer social security numbers. The researchers were able to accurately predict the full social security number of 8.5% of people born between 1989 and 2003 (Lohr). They were able to do so by birthdates and birth cities or states to obtain the first three digits, the remaining digits were discovered by using the publicly released social security numbers of the deceased and statistically analyzing them to reverse engineer how the government assigned them (Lohr).

Works Cited

Lohr, Steve. “How Privacy Vanishes Online.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 17 Mar. 2010, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/17/technology/17privacy.html.