MIT BDA Module 1 Unit 1 Video 7 Transcript

Speaker key

CK: Cameron Kerry

HY: HapYak

CK: You've heard from Professor Pentland some of the introductory issues about privacy. Privacy really comes into play when doing analytics involving data about people. In this module, I'll talk about some of the basic concepts of what privacy is and why it is important. Later I'll cover the rules that apply, the laws and the policies that affect different kinds of data. And then we'll explore some of the practical implications of those rules and policies in using data that affects people.

So let's begin by talking about what privacy is and why it matters to people. Let me begin by asking what privacy means to you. Here's some concepts about privacy that are much debated by privacy experts, and let me ask you to pick the one that you think best applies to what privacy means to you. The first concept is personal dignity and autonomy, what privacy says about you, the right to control the way that data about you is used and how you are presented to the world.

Another concept is freedom, the right to be free of surveillance by governments or by others, especially when that information can be used in ways that are harmful to your interests.

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Another concept is separation from others, the ability to maintain some physical or personal space to yourself. And a final concept is anonymity and secrecy, a right to remain anonymous or to keep communications secret from others.

HY: What does privacy mean to you?

Thank you for your reflection. Keep watching to learn more about the specific ways in which privacy is understood by society.

CK: Personal dignity and autonomy is seen as a major reason that privacy and data protection are deeply embedded in European law. Jaron Lanier, one of the developers of virtual reality, and a trenchant critic of digital technology, has likened consumers to ants generating data for the benefit of others. And Facebook learned that one size doesn't fit all for privacy settings. And we present a different picture of ourselves on LinkedIn than most people do on Facebook.

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Freedom is deeply embedded in American law and political culture, as reflected in our Bill of Rights, which has been extended to electronic information. But as we see from the reaction to the Snowden disclosures, freedom is also a strong value in Europe and elsewhere in the world.

Separation from others is a deeply human instinct. The, one of the foundational scholars of privacy, Alan Westin, showed that in developed societies, sex is something that couples take inside the bedroom or other enclosed spaces, but in the more distant past or in less developed societies, where people are crowded together, people go outside to copulate. Personal space allows us to define who we are, express ourselves or withhold information, to maintain intimacy in personal relationships.

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Anonymity is something we may have in a crowd among strangers. Something we used to think we had browsing on the Internet. Secrecy is the cryptologists' definition of privacy, think PGP, Pretty Good Privacy. All of these are different facets of what we call privacy. They have different emphases in different cultures, but they are universal, and they have a great deal of overlap.

Encryption forms a kind of enclosure around our communications that allows us to choose who we share it with. Europeans put greater emphasis on dignity and autonomy, but Americans and others want to control their data as well. Autonomy is about personality and self-definition, but it is also about political freedom of self-determination, something that we express when we stand on our own two feet and we separate ourselves from our parents.

All of these are reasons that privacy is considered a fundamental right, declared in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, a part of the United Nations' Declaration of Rights, and declared as a fundamental right in the US Privacy Act of 1974 and in Supreme Court decisions.

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Now let's look at some countervailing values. Privacy interests often come into tension with other important social values.

HY: Can you think of any social interests that conflict with people's right to privacy?

Thank you for your reflection. Keep watching to hear about some of the countervailing values that conflict with our right to privacy.

These include public safety and security, social connection and cohesion, and then the social value of information. Public safety and security. Surveillance exists because a fundamental purpose of government is to protect societies and people from invasion, from terrorism, from crime, but history has shown that authoritarian governments conduct surveillance to repress people, and to conduct genocide. Democratic societies seek to put boundaries on the use of surveillance through rule of law measures like oversights, and limits on the use. But history also shows abuse by democratic societies.

As digitization and the connection of everything expands the scope of surveillance, and in the wake of the Snowden Leaks, the question of what are the proper safeguards and the limits of surveillance is an ongoing debate in many societies around the world.

Social connection and cohesion. Human beings organize themselves into societies and communities. Identity is important to an ordered society; identifiers are the trust certificates of social intercourse.

Groups require communication to collaborate and to co-exist. How do we encourage connectivity and communication, while preserving privacy?   The social value of information, this is a consideration and is certainly front and center when it comes to data analytics.

In America, the right to communicate and to receive information is part of the constitutional right of freedom of expression. Information, whether an exchange of ideas or the conduct of data analysis, provides fuel for rational thought, inquiry and research.

HY: Which of these countervailing values do you think is most important?

    A. Public safety and security
    B. Social connection and cohesion
    C. Social value of information

As you'll see, later in the course, some steps to protect privacy can strip data sets of their utility. But some products of data analysis can step over the boundaries into what's creepy or what's worse, what's harmful or unlawful. How do you determine where those boundaries are?

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These are a few significant social uses and the values of information and data analysis. I hope that this section has given you some basic concepts of privacy and the important issues that are debated about privacy. Next, we'll look at some of the ways that law and policy address the questions of how to advance these social values and protect privacy.