

On GDPR and Information Privacy in China

Today I am going to focus on the problem of information privacy and data protection. To begin my topic, I would like to ask you one question: do you remember having the following experience? Whenever you open a website or scroll down the home page of Taobao, targeted advertisements based on your browse history automatically pop up. Your data are being exploited, by virtually every mobile application and data platform. Indeed, thanks to the astounding capability of artificial intelligence, some companies collect our data to improve our user experience. For instance, the targeted advertising in Taobao can sometimes be pretty helpful, and the location tracking feature of my photo app does give me a sense of recollection after a travel. However, they often collect the data without our active consent, and it is not reassuring that all your personal information, all the traces of your daily life, are controlled by large companies, who might make a fortune selling your information to someone else. What is more disturbing is that user data are susceptible to malicious attack. Like in 2016, a massive data leak of Yahoo caused terrifying consequences.

There really should be some regulation to protect us. However, the fact that user data collection is simultaneously beneficial and dangerous poses a dilemma. When the protection is going too far, it becomes problematic. Last year, the European Union's GDPR, the General Data Protection Regulation, came into effect. According to this European regulation, full control of the data should be given back to every citizen in Europe, and further, every program must minimize all data sharing options by default. The regulation is fruitful. Companies like Facebook and Google have faced harsh punishment for breaking the rule, and were forced to make substantial changes in the European market. However, the data welfare of the European citizens comes at a price. Since the regulation is so strong, many companies simply couldn't afford to maintain their services in Europe. After the first year of GDPR's implementation, we've seen mounting evidence that the information industry in Europe is declining. In the European stock markets, transactions of the IT industry have decreased 32 percent. Investment into data technology has faced an unprecedented drop.

The case in Europe is a profound one. Is data privacy a problem? Of course it is. But if Chinese government is planning anything about it, they must avoid the mistake made by the European Parliament, and must find an approach that does not threaten the industry too much. The government should really do something to protect our data, but, they must also recognize the trade-off and leave some room, especially for those new companies in the market, in order to keep the industry vibrant. A unified data interface should be engineered, to facilitate restrained usage of our data, and to prevent malicious exploitation. Data scientists, product managers and lawmakers must collaborate to strike a balance between security and data availability.