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A Social, Individualized Internet

The Internet is an uncontrollable, ever-present mass of information that is accessible by basically anybody. Though it was first created as a means to send data over long distances between military bases more efficiently than Morse code or telecom, it evolved into one of the biggest industries the world has ever seen, and now transfers an unfathomably large amount of data all across the world every second of every day. Due to the open nature of the Internet, it is very hard to limit who can access what kinds of information. Client side filters now exist for parents to hide offensive content from their children, but they only affect the specific devices they are installed on, and are easy to circumvent. Had the early pioneers of the Internet realized the extent to which the Internet would be used in the future, they could have laid more personalized infrastructure early on, which would help make everyone’s browsing experience unique, and help tailor it to them specifically. I believe a more social, personalized Internet would be beneficial to a lot of people, though it would result in an Internet very different to the one we’ve come to know and love.

In cryptography, public and private keys are used to ensure only authorized people can see certain information. Information encrypted by a private key can only be decrypted by the same private key. In the same vein, the Internet could have forced everyone to have their own personal key that is tied to them when accessing certain, if not most sites. The key would be exclusive by person, and would identify who they are to the sites visit and servers they access. This goes directly against the current anonymity of the Internet, which I believe is a good thing. Average sites could have publicly accessible pages that wouldn’t require a key, but any site that currently requires the use of an “account” would instead require the use of your key to create and sign into said account. The key would be connected to the account, and all of your accounts could be tied directly to you, resulting in a sort of “master account” that manages all of the accounts you have on other sites. Because your key is just an identifying number or some mathematical construct, it doesn’t have all of your private info on it. At first this idea may seem like a simple barrier to using the Internet, but I believe it has many merits. Kids would have to use their own keys that their parents would help them acquire, which would let sites know their age and other information about them. Because sites would require a key to register for an account or potentially even use their service, certain sites that are meant to be illegal for minors to visit, like pornography and gambling sites, would be easier to keep secure. This would also help alleviate identity theft and impersonation issues on social media: presently, all it would take for me to create a profile imitating someone else on Facebook would be knowledge of their full name, and a picture of their face. Requiring the use of keys to register accounts for websites would help uphold personal accountability, and would help tailor one’s browsing experience to them.

Requiring individual, key-based authentication when signing up for accounts would also alleviate many issues caused by spam bots. If you’ve ever signed up for a website, you’ve probably seen a “CAPTCHA”, which stands for “Completely Automated Public Turing Test To Tell Computers and Humans Apart.” These are used to make sure simple scripts aren’t signing up for hundreds of accounts using false information, or otherwise hammering servers with useless requests. If making an account required a key, and each key could only be used once, CAPTCHA would be entirely unnecessary, as spam bots as we know them would be impossible to create. Imagine a world where spam email was easily traced back to the user who sent it, and that user could then be placed under some sort of restriction, as a penalty. On that note, having accounts tied to a key would really help deter unscrupulous behavior online overall; as of right now, there are two main punishments any individual site can deliver onto someone: they can ban an account, or they can IP-ban the user. In the former, the specific account the user was logged into is revoked certain, if not all privileges, which means the user loses certain progress or loses any reputation they may have had for themselves, because the account that they were using is no longer accessible or usable. This is rather easily circumvented, as the user could simply start from square one, creating a new account and continuing their unscrupulous behavior. IP-banning, on the other hand, prevents any computer using the same IP address from accessing the site; this means the user would no longer be able to use the site from their home, regardless of how many accounts they made. This method is still possible to circumvent by the use of proxies, or by using the Internet somewhere else. Using individualized keys solves both of these problems; each key can only make a single account per site, and has to be used when logging in; banning the key from the site effectively bans that user from using the service with no easy way back in. These sorts of bans could even warn other sites that this user has a bad history. All of these things would come together to make the Internet a more personal space, where people can’t hide behind anonymous masks to be rude and vile, which I believe is a net positive for everyone.

When I was younger, this system would have been simpler to me than the system I came to know; one of my first accounts was an AIM account, and for that I had to remember my username and my password, both of which I set myself. I later made more accounts elsewhere, and they each had their own usernames, email addresses, and passwords to remember. Even if each site could have its own password, having a single key to myself that would have helped sites know who I was would have been very useful, and intuitive. I could have opened up AIM, plugged in my key, entered my password, and been on my way. From there, knowing that the process was the same for any site I wanted to access would have made the Internet an easier place to understand.

This entire concept, of course, has drawbacks. Having people share keys could cause issues or misunderstandings, and would have to be strongly discouraged. Putting the infrastructure in place to make sure anyone and everyone who wants a key can get one would be challenging, if not impossible, which is why I would propose making it an online service. The service would allow anyone with a key to apply for more keys for their family members, like a father or mother for their children. Many people, myself included, would probably be worried about the inherent privacy risks involved with every single account they’re associated with online being tied to a single key, which could be stolen, though that is why passwords would exist on top of keys. All in all, I believe the positives could outweigh the negatives, and this fundamental shift in the ideology of the Internet could be a good thing for the community at large.

The Internet, as it currently stands, is a lawless, anonymous, and sometimes dark place. It has been known to spew all kinds of vitriol at real people, with no signs of remorse or compassion for them. This kind of thing is much less common on sites where people can easily be identified, like Facebook, though it still has been known to happen to some extent. Had the Internet been structured in such a way where every account, on any site that mandated it, had to be tied to a unique key held only by one specific person, people would be forced to act more humanely, and would be unable to hide behind the shield of anonymity. Parents would be able to protect their kids from content they don’t want them to see, websites would be better able to maintain their communities and remove people causing problems, and current issues with spam and fake accounts would be much less prevalent than they currently are. In the end, any idea that results in less Nigerian Prince Scams and Penis Enlargement Pill advertisements in my inbox sounds like a pretty good idea to me.