

Privacy Policy Project Transcript

My Surveillance and Social Media class consisted of five projects (six if you include the group podcast), all of which had an ultimate goal of researching various elements of online surveillance and disseminating that information to a certain audience.

The project I'll be referring to is the privacy policy project, where I delved into Instagram's privacy policy and its transparency – or lack thereof.

Choosing an audience to present the information to was, in a sense, a way to establish my own understanding of what the privacy policy entailed. This was difficult, given that the policy thrives off of vague technological jargon in order to best ensure access to user data. Many of my classmates creatively chose to focus their project towards a very young audience or, conversely, an elderly audience. This allowed them to adjust their language and explanations to mirror that of what the policy should look like in order for as many people to understand it as possible. The particular audience I chose came from the fact that after I developed a fair grasp on what was actually being outlined in the policy, I felt personally manipulated. Even being a part of a tech-savvy and progressive generation, Instagram did their best to convolute my rights as an Instagram user, because at the end of the day, they know that those rights are limited and inadequate.

Fueled by my frustration and lack of control, I tailored the project towards an audience of prospective Binghamton Students. This audience consists of people around my age – give or take a few years – who are also well-versed account holders. They are experienced Instagram users, largely because that age group makes up so much of Instagram's network. And because they are so routinely online, they deserve a truthful rendition of the privacy policy, especially if they want to best present themselves to a prestigious university like Binghamton.

This audience also shaped how I chose my narrative and style because having been in that position just four years ago, I remember wanting someone to tell me the facts as they were and the information I needed to put my best foot forward. Considering this, I interpreted my audience as young adults who understand mature concepts yet are looking for accessible, straightforward explanations. I also formatted my examples around content that I was hyper aware of while applying to college, such as what my profile said about me as a person, student and applicant.

After confirming my audience, I thought about how best to delineate their rights. As an editor for my school's paper, I felt that prospective Binghamton students would be provided the most concrete and reliable version of a policy if it was communicated via a newspaper. I therefore created The Bupsi Times, where Bupsi stands for BU Prospective Students on Instagram. The issue I published incorporates five subsets from Instagram's privacy policy, including "Things You and Others Do and Provide," "Information from Partners," "Responding to Legal Requests," "Managing and Deleting Information" and "Content Others Share or Reshare About You."

The six topics I focused on were not randomly selected. All of them, omitting "Managing and Deleting Information," were chosen because they tied back to the lack of self-regulation one has as an account holder. In other words, these ideas have to do with having limited personal privacy due to the fact that so much of our online presence is accessible or controlled by others. Emphasis on others.

Information about you is available from *others*, shared by *others* and requested by *others*, and Instagram's privacy policy basically says much of that is unavoidable. Sharing information online is a tried and true marketing champagne, so it paradoxically gives big data platforms an incentive to be lenient with privacy.

Under the “Things You and Others Do and Provide” category, I learned about how even when you yourself keep a low profile, if your friends post about you, that information is obtained and interpreted through Instagram. Additionally, if the picture of you was posted from a public account, anyone, such as admission officers, can access that photo of you.

In terms of the “Information from Partners” topic, the “partners” at hand are third-party services and companies that Instagram shares your information with. They claim this is to better personalize your feed, but in reality, this makes it so that these third parties can reach more people who have interest in their products and services.

The “Responding to Legal Requests” section was particularly unsettling because I found out that Instagram’s policy for responding to legal requests relies on “good faith.” In other words, if Instagram has reason to believe you’re involved in fraud or illegal activity, they can review your personal information and share it with third-party services on the pretext of “good faith.” So, if you are interacting with the right things at the wrong time or unknowingly looking at suspicious activity, your information can be shared. Not only is it shared, but it’s shared under the vague, subjective justification of “good faith.” As a college applicant, this can falsely damage a student’s image, which is something I stressed under that section of the project.

“Content Others Share or Reshare About You” is a section that basically says, *although we as Instagram cannot allow your private account to be seen by people who don’t follow you, Instagram has no control or regulation over how your information, private or not, is shared by others.* People can screenshot anything on their device, for example, and if that information is shared, that’s not up for Instagram to regulate.

As for why I chose “Managing and Deleting Information” in addition to the previous four topics, I’ve always been pretty spooked about the endlessly preached warning of “once you hit send, it’s out there

forever.” Forever is a long time, and I’m not sure I’d ever want something available about me online forever, at least not under my control. This mindset is what inclined the incorporation of that fifth idea, even if it’s not as much having to do with “others” like the other four. After zeroing in on this idea, I learned about Instagram’s six month policy, which basically explains that even after you delete something from your search history, it is still available via Instagram or its third-party services for six months. While six months is slightly less haunting than forever, it still places my words in the hands of someone else after they’re gone from my possession, and who knows how my words can be used against me?

This project not only demonstrated the ambiguity of privacy policies, but what they actually entail. Instagram doesn't make it easily known that your account information and what you post is shared with third party services, nor do they make it clear *how* it is shared. The lack of transparency is because Instagram wants you, as an unknowing user, to provide information that otherwise wouldn't be provided having known the limitations of your rights. I learned how to decode obscure explanations of user rights and ultimately how to disseminate the proper information to specific audiences.