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Exposed in Isolation

DMITRY EPSTEIN
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

Connected in Isolation (Hargittai, 2022) captures a unique moment in the modern history of sociotechnical relationships. The unprecedented speed and scope of the transition to digitally-mediated communication during the worldwide COVID shelter-in-place orders emphasized both digital inequalities and their repercussions. While the book focuses primarily on misinformation and health safety, it calls for a broader perspective on digital disparities. Inspired by this call, I want to reflect on the link between digital privacy and inequality, which is weaved throughout the book. For example, Hargittai points to the constitutive power of default privacy settings, strategic disclosure practices, and knowledge about online privacy and security as inherent components of digital skills. Reading *Connected in Isolation*, I could not help but notice how it complements emerging research on digital privacy and inequality.

Digital Privacy and Inequality

A growing body of literature suggests that privacy is an important dimension of digital inequality, marginalization, and power in datafied societies (e.g., Büchi, Just, & Latzer; 2017; Epstein & Quinn, 2020; Marwick & boyd, 2018). When it comes to access, privacy concerns may hinder Internet adoption among underserved populations (Li, Chen, & Straubhaar, 2018) or provide them with "privacy-poor" and "surveillance-rich" Internet infrastructure (Gangadharan, 2017, pp. 608–609). Privacy skills, literacy, and behaviors also reflect, even if partially, established digital disparities across age, gender, education, and minority and socioeconomic statuses (e.g., Epstein & Quinn, 2020; Madden, 2017). Similar to observations in *Connected in Isolation*, some of those relationships are intuitive, while others are not. Age, for example, is negatively associated with disclosure, privacy protecting behavior, and digital skills (Kezer, Sevi, Cemalcilar, & Baruh, 2016; Li et al., 2018), but positively associated with broader privacy literacy (Epstein & Quinn, 2020).

Beyond individual behaviors, privacy is an increasingly important marker of structural inequality. It has been labeled as a "luxury commodity" (Papacharissi, 2010) and as a "privilege" (Marwick & boyd, 2018, pp. 1158–1159) due to the financial and social capital required for effective, proactive privacy management. The flip side is a "digital footprint gap" (Büchi et al., 2017, p. 10), which exacerbates the unwilling exposure, problematic profiling without recourse, and invasive surveillance experienced by those who are less capable of managing or unable to manage their privacy.

Privacy During Pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, privacy discussions focused mostly on government and private surveillance for contact tracing. The efforts to curb the spread of the virus emphasized informational power imbalance between individuals and institutions (both private and public). It was particularly evident among marginalized populations already confronted with extensive digital footprints and subjected to extensive

surveillance. The additional loss of privacy had an immediate compounding effect on existing inequalities, affecting trust in public institutions and the effectiveness of pandemic response (e.g., Chan & Saqib, 2021; O'Donnell et al., 2022).

However, less research attention has been paid to perspectives presented in *Connected in Isolation* (Hargittai, 2022), such as privacy implications of changes in mundane uses of digital technologies during self-isolation. The broad adoption of videoconferencing, the associated need to renegotiate privacy boundaries, and increased commercial surveillance instilled by the need to remotely shop, connect, learn, work, and more, resulted in almost physical collapse of communication contexts. This moment of turbulence shed new light on the intersection of digital privacy and inequality.

For example, the suddenly broad acceptance of remote work and learning, blurred the physical and behavioral boundaries between the public and the private. Having dedicated working space became an important factor for remote workers' ability to exert control over their physical environment, social interactions, and background noises, thus preserving elements deemed private (Allen, Merlo, Lawrence, Slutsky, & Gray, 2021). In the shift to emergency remote teaching, sharing space with family members, particularly younger children or siblings, posed additional challenges for both teachers and students in terms of maintaining privacy boundaries. This dynamic affected their abilities to perform professionally or to learn (e.g., John, Joeckel, Epstein, & Dogruel, 2022). The luxury of separating work from home while in isolation was a function of available resources, placing the less affluent in an inherently disadvantaged situation, even before they turned on their gadgets.

Another aspect of maintaining digital privacy while connected in isolation was related to disparities in skills. Already prior to the pandemic, privacy literacy and active privacy management were found to be related to previously established markers of digital inequality (Epstein & Quinn, 2020). The pandemic accentuated those tendencies, as people not only had to operate new digital tools but also suddenly had to figure out how to manage their privacy. Similar to Hargittai's observations regarding the link between seeking technical assistance and inequality, managing digital privacy during the pandemic required skills and literacy that were unequally distributed within societies. In educational settings, for example, a combination of privacy predispositions and inadequate skills resulted in rather tangible harms, such as unintentional disclosure of personal student information when sharing a teacher's screen (Dogruel, Epstein, Joeckel, & John, 2023).

More broadly, the shift to remote connectedness required subscribing to new tools and services, thus escalating previously existing trends of trading private information for access to tools and services (Dé, Pandey, & Pal, 2020). Government-sanctioned technological surveillance notwithstanding, shelter-in-place orders caused existing users to increase private communication and commercial activities on the Internet. Moreover, the enforced isolation drove nonusers to embrace online communication and services. Together, those trends increased everyone's digital footprint, generating sensitive data held mostly by commercial service providers such as social media platforms or e-commerce websites. Those digital records are destined to remain in use for perpetuity, as "privacy rights, once relinquished, are rarely regained" (Brough & Martin, 2020, p. 109), thus perpetuating existing power structures of surveillance capitalism (Vitak & Zimmer, 2020).

Concluding Thoughts

Reading *Connected in Isolation* (Hargittai, 2022) emphasizes the need to consider privacy as an increasingly important aspect of digital inequality. The book highlights the impact of digital inequalities on citizens' information and self-protection during the pandemic. Other research suggests that privacy considerations also played into the dynamics of gaining trust and cooperation from the public toward the effort to stop the spread of the pandemic. Further, privacy research points out some longer-term effects of the efforts to stay connected in isolation on inequality—the unequal exposure of individual to both government and commercial surveillance. Amid the pandemic, as people struggled to stay connected in isolation, they also grappled, even if not explicitly, with managing the extent to which they will have to be exposed when adopting digital services, products, apps, and communication solutions. Decisions made in times of crisis and practices adapted in emergencies have a certain stickiness to them, as they persist even when the immediate danger subsides. Using the lens of inequality to scrutinize those decisions and practices is an important perspective in assessing their effects.

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