Insecurity in cyberspace: on sharing data online

In a lane that passes by an art décor store in Fort Kochi, Kerala, blue letters painted on a white compound wall display an unusual message: "No CCTV surveillance. Here, it is the watchfulness of concerned citizens that protects the property." Data mining and surveillance may have become synonymous with social good and public safety in the digital age, but anxiety about data theft and tampering has become a reality for social media, Internet and digital service users.

On April 13, the new Breach Level Index, released by digital security firm Gemalto, reported a 783% increase in cases of data theft in India in 2017. Most compromised or stolen records belonged to the government, which was followed by the retail and technology sectors. Globally, sectors which were hit the most by data theft in 2017 were healthcare (27%), financial services (12%), education (11%) and government (11%). In terms of the number of records lost, stolen or compromised, the most targeted sectors were government (18%), financial services (9.1%) and technology (16%).

What social media platforms and search engines know about you

Facebook estimated that the personal data of 5,62,455 users in India was "improperly shared" with British consultancy firm Cambridge Analytica after users accessed an app, "thisisyourdigitallife", between November 2013 and December 2015. India, with 241 million active Facebook users, is the largest audience country for the social media giant.

Illegal data mining apart, the Reserve Bank of India reported a 35% increase (from 8,765 cases to 11,997) in ATM credit, debit card and net banking related fraud cases between 2012-13 and 2015-16 even as concerns about data theft from the Unique Identification Authority of India persisted. The cumulative effect of reported security breaches is that a sense of mistrust is taking shape among Internet users.

Reports suggest that a significant number of users have shown unwillingness to use technology and are uncertain about sharing basic data — name, location, date of birth — on third party applications. Quantifying the level of concern, a market research company, Velocity MR, in May 2018 released a survey that found that after the Facebook security breach, 24% of Indian users started sharing "lot less" personal data online while 7% stopped sharing data altogether. Also, 6% stopped Internet transactions while 28% of users reduced such transactions and 42% reported that they had become "more cautious".

With India's Internet users expected to hit the 500 million mark this year, dispelling data anxieties remains a key challenge. Y. Venugopal Reddy, former RBI Governor and Chairman of the 14th Finance Commission of India, said, "There is an anxiety that financial and private activities of individuals are being monitored for profit by a third party. Developing trust in government to protect citizens is the first step towards reducing people's fears." Though the Supreme Court ruled in August 2017 that the right to privacy is a fundamental right, the question remains: is everyone ready to take the next personality quiz on an app online?

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This refers to the tendency to form friendships and other forms of interpersonal relationships with

people we come across often in our daily lives.