TOWARDS AN EXPLORATION OF CROSS-CULTURAL FACTORS IN PRIVACY ONLINE

By Steve McRobb, in collaboration with Yohko Orito, Kiyoshi Murata and Andrew Adams

1. Abstract

This paper presents a description of the early stages of a collaborative, cross-cultural, multi-disciplinary project that seeks to investigate how privacy online is understood in Japan as compared with the United Kingdom. Much still remains to be done – and perhaps there will be a lot more to report by the time this paper is presented at conference.

Previous studies have examined this topic in the context of Western democracies, and to a limited extent also in the Middle East. But relatively little attention has thus far been paid to cross-cultural factors, and those few studies that have addressed this topic have so far been inconclusive about the role of culture in relation to privacy issues and Internet behaviour.

The Internet is now emphatically a global phenomenon with little respect for national, cultural or language differences. It is not under the hegemony of any one social group, whether at local, national or regional level. In recognition of this, the study aims to address the gap in our knowledge.

2. Introduction

This paper describes the current state of a work that is barely in progress, a research project that has really just begun to take shape in the minds of its collaborating partners. The initial aim of the work is to focus on the different interpretations that subjects in the UK and Japan are expected to arrive at when asked to read a set of online privacy statements. It is hoped that this will be illuminating in at least two distinct ways. It may help us to understand better how information privacy is understood, and what are peoples' attitudes towards it, in two very different cultures. It may also help to guide organisations to become more culturally sensitive in their statements and practices.

The project derives directly from a paper presented by Orito and Murata at Ethicomp 2005. This paper argued cogently for a different interpretation of the social meaning of privacy in a Japanese cultural context. Many Japanese use the imported word for privacy "without clearly understanding its meaning" [Orito and Murata, 2005]. In traditional Japanese culture, it would be regarded as anti-social for an individual to assert a *right* to personal privacy. Furthermore, explicit statements (such as those that Westerners might expect from an organisation's privacy policy) are routinely avoided,

the preference being for implied forms of communication that allow both parties to form an understanding of each other without the embarrassment of direct attribution or acknowledgement.

Japan was initially chosen for comparison, for the rather obvious reason that Orita and Murata – the authors who sowed the idea, and also now collaborators on the project – are Japanese. However, on many other grounds, differences between Euro-centric and Japanese cultural assumptions about privacy are important. Japan ranks high on most relevant scales. It has the 2nd highest nominal GDP [nationmaster.com, 2007], is the 10th most populous country [infoplease.com, 2007]. With more specific reference to this study, it ranks 4th for total number of Internet users and 3rd for total number of broadband connections [nationmaster.com, 2007]. The Japanese language also ranks 11th for total number of native speakers [krysstal.com, 2007] and, not surprisingly, is the 3rd most requested on the Internet – just ahead of Spanish [internetworldstats.com, 2007].

While the research itself has not yet begun, the process of defining the research is well under way. As a first step, several collaborators were identified and enlisted. In addition to the present author, the team now consists of Yohko Orito, Professor Kiyoshi Murata (both of Meiji University, Tokyo) and Dr. Andrew Adams (Reading University, UK). The following sections of the paper discuss some practical, philosophical and methodological issues that have been considered so far by this team. Where possible, an outline is also given of how it is currently planned to address the issues. Naturally, it is hoped that it will be possible to report on further progress by the time that the conference takes place in March 2007.

3. Background

A considerable body of literature exists on investigations into privacy online. The issues of concern can be viewed from several perspectives. Individuals (as consumers, employees, students, citizens, and so on) must assess the risks of exposing our personal data before engaging in online behaviour that involves this. Businesses and other organisations that aim to provide services through, or to obtain profit from, online interaction with individuals in one or more of these roles must strike a balance between maximising the amount of useful information that is collected and antagonising those who are described by that information (or other organisations who in some way represent those individuals). Positive benefits may be extracted from information about the individuals who transact with an organisation. On the other hand, there may be great disadvantage in being too intrusive, or being too irresponsible with the information that is collected. Meanwhile, governments and other agencies have a responsibility to define and regulate policy with regard to the exchange and use of personal information.

But the preceding statements are made from within the relatively homogenous perspective of the Western liberal democracies (taken here to include Australia and New Zealand, but not such countries as Japan or Malaysia where the cultural heritage is very

different). True, there is diversity within this region, and certainly many differences of opinion about the importance of privacy, what the issues are and how they should be addressed. Some studies have concentrated on mapping this diversity. Jarvenpaa and Tractinsky [1999] conducted an early comparative study of consumer trust related to Internet shopping in Australia, Finland and Israel, and found some evidence of differing levels of trust. More recently Dinev et al. [2006] found different levels of concerns about Internet privacy and government surveillance of online activities in a comparative survey conducted in Italy and the United States. But these are essentially all liberal Western democracies with their roots in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Most organisations and citizens in this domain share, due to their common linguistic and/or cultural heritages, assumptions that may not exist in non-Western cultures. Or, if they exist at all, they may take very different forms.

By contrast, relatively little attention has yet been paid to the differing meanings, values and behaviours associated with privacy in societies whose cultural compass points elsewhere than the West. Some who have studied the cross-cultural questions in a more truly global sense have concentrated on theoretical and conceptual analyses. Zakaria, Stanton and Sarkar-Barney [2003) present a theoretical framework for integrating cultural values and privacy issues. Their paper aims to apply the framework to the design and implementation of IT applications that will be culturally sensitive, but empirical testing still lay in its future. Interestingly, these authors note that: "Studies of Arabic Middle Eastern culture have also described three basic cultural values in common: collectivism, honor, and hospitality" [ibid.], which may provide an interesting comparison with Japanese attitudes.

Of course, privacy is not only important for ICT-enabled activities, and some authors range far beyond this terrain. Reinforcing Orito and Murata, Makoto and Tamura [2005] compare the general Japanese concept of privacy with its Western equivalent, while Kitiyadisai [2005] does a similar job from a Thai point of view. Ritsuko [2002] examines popular styles of housing in Japan and England and concludes that they embody different, culturally specific attitudes towards privacy.

Some have conducted empirical investigations but focused only on a single culture. Shalhoub [2006] analysed the privacy policies of a number of organisations in an Arab context, but these are all drawn from states within the Gulf area. Other empirical studies make explicit cross-cultural comparisons but are unable to separate cultural factors from other environmental factors. For example, Choi and Lee [2003] and Park and Jun [2003] both report on quantitative, empirical studies that compared online shopping behaviour and attitudes in Korea and in the US. Neither study was able to demonstrate any clear causal link between culture and the observed differences in attitude and behaviour.

Of course, it is unsurprising that cross-cultural aspects of privacy online have received relatively little attention. The affluent professional middle classes of the developed world have been the principal drivers for the spread of the Internet and e-Commerce, and

also the first adopters of new services and channels of communication. It has been chiefly among this group that new online behaviours and attitudes have first emerged. But this picture is changing rapidly as many citizens of the majority world rush to connect to the Internet. In any case, there is little excuse for the prevailing, self-obsessed Western focus to continue to dominate.

4. Aims

The project represents one small step towards filling a gap in what we know about how the concept of privacy is understood, and can be misunderstood, across cultural boundaries. It aims to do this through an empirical investigation into British and Japanese attitudes towards privacy online. To an extent, it builds on a continuing survey of privacy policies that has been reported at previous Ethicomp conferences [McRobb and Rogerson, 2004; 2005]. The current plan involves a significant extension to the scope of this work, to examine whether, and how, privacy policies are differently perceived in two cultures that have very different understandings of the very nature of privacy, and of its social value. In particular, the study sets out to:

- identify, describe and analyse cultural differences between the responses of subjects in the two target countries to a set of privacy policies;

- draw inferences about culturally-specific aspects of attitudes to privacy in an online environment;

- make recommendations to organisations that will help them to culturally sensitise their policies and practices with regard to privacy of personal information.

5. Methodological, Philosophical and Practical Issues

In order to attain the aims, it will be necessary to reach a clear recognition of the nature of the cultural differences concerning privacy between the two countries. A number of authors have been identified that have addressed issues related to Japanese culture and privacy. These including Doi, T. [1971], Nakane, C. [1970], Mizutani, et al [2004] and Nakada and Tamura [2005]. Using, and where appropriate criticising, the work of these authors (and perhaps others yet to be identified) it should be possible to construct a conceptual map that describes and characterises the Japanese mentality and behaviour regarding privacy.

Following suggestions by Professor Murata during the initial discussions, this is expected to involve two pairs of binary oppositions. First, *Tatemae* (what one says or writes in the way of polite fiction) can be contrasted with *Hon'ne* (what one means, or naked truth). Second, *Uchi* (inside / family circle) can be contrasted with *Soto* or *Yoso* (outside / stranger). An examination of the semantics of these – and other related terms – will, it is hoped, serve to explain why and how Japanese conceptions of privacy, essentially derived from a collectivist mentality, differ from their British equivalents

based on a more individualistic culture. Religious differences may provide another strand of explanation. Here, the Japanese amalgam of Confucianism, Buddhism and Shinto stands in contrast to the British combination of a Christianity majority with other predominantly monotheistic religious minorities and a strong secular tradition.

It has become clear through such early discussions that a rich understanding of the cultural context in which this research will be conducted is an essential precursor to designing the practical aspects of the project. Although, so far as the author is presently aware, no one has yet directly addressed the issues of concern for this paper, the contextual discussion has been well established. The question of how to integrate traditional Japanese values and concerns with so-called 'modern' ones – typified by democratic forms of government, a free press and socio-technical progress in wider society – has long been an issue for a variety of writers, ranging from the philosopher Kimura [1972] to the novelist Ishiguro [1986]. More recently, Capurra [2005] has laid some of the foundations for an intercultural account of privacy with information technology in mind.

A number of research instruments can be considered. One approach would be to observe subjects' behaviour directly. One way to do this would be to set up a fake e-commerce site (or sites) designed to reflect appropriate hypotheses, and to observe or otherwise track how subjects respond to elements of the site, including the privacy policy. Such an approach resembles that used, for example, by Berendt al. [2005]. Alternatively, subjects' responses could be tracked as they visit existing web sites selected on the basis of their privacy policy. The latter approach resembles the work of Choi and Lee [2003] and Park and Jun [2003]. Study of behaviour suggests a positivist bias, which might appeal to a company that wants statistically valid advice on how to please their customers. But there are limitations to the extent to which the information derived from such a study might be generalised.

Second, the focus might be on the measurement of attitudes rather than behaviour, for example through the use of questionnaires or interviews. In addition, this could be based either on fake or real websites. Other researchers have conducted similar studies e.g. Dinev et al. [2006], although not in such a culturally diverse context.

A third option is to assess subjects' understanding of the content and significance of privacy policies, through the use of questionnaires or interviews. This resembles another recent study by the author [McRobb, 2007].

The bias of the team is likely to be towards an interpretive study of attitudes and/or understanding. This would produce findings that cannot be so easily generalised, but the understanding is likely to be much richer.

There is also scope for undertaking a critical study that considers the possible hidden motives of organisations and individuals that lie behind attitudes to privacy and the use, release, or concealment of

personal information. Such an approach could be rewarding in this field and could follow, for example, the linguistic analysis of privacy policies undertaken by Pollach [2005].

Of course, the approach must be established before the research instruments can be developed. But it is hard to imagine how this topic could be researched without the involvement of subjects in Japan and in the UK. For the sake of pure convenience, these may be students at the Universities were the collaborators teach. A number of complications will then arise. First, the contrast between mono-cultural Japanese students and multicultural British students must be addressed, both in the research design and in the interpretation of the results. Second, there are issues in the translation between languages. This has some impact on the conceptual level, since the collaborators themselves may find it difficult to be sure that they understand each other, and that the precise semantics of words and phrases have been translated appropriately. On a practical level, there are also issues of translation. For example, if a fake website is to be created, should it be rendered in English only – which seems quite inappropriate, given the relative prominence of the two languages on the Internet – or should it be rendered in the local language for each group of subjects? Another interesting issue arises in the case that a fake privacy policy is to be written so that it can be posted on a fake website? What content should this have? Should it be designed as a close representation of a real policy, or policies? Or should it be written to specifically test hypotheses, or so that it is in some way provocative?

Conclusion

Japanese and British cultures are probably as unlike each other as any two cultures in the world. But at the beginning of the 21st century the web brings people in every place closer to the global village [McLuhan, 1964]. Simultaneously, the former capitalist order based on production elides to a new order based on the flow of information and centred not on nations, but on cities [Lash, 2002]. It then becomes important to understand how such a fundamental concept as privacy can be mutually understood and acted upon in two very different cultures, at opposite ends of the world, which even in recent history had almost no point of common reference.

This paper has attempted to give an insight into the early stages of a collaborative research project that spans these two cultures and also necessarily draws on many disciplines. Much still remains to be done – and perhaps there will be a lot more to report by the time this paper is presented at conference.

References

Berendt, B., Günther, O and Spiekermann, S. (2005), "Privacy in E-Commerce: Stated Preferences vs. Actual Behaviour", *Communications of the ACM,* **48**:4, 101−106.

Capurro, R. (2005), "Privacy: An Intercultural Perspective", Ethics and Information

Technology, **7**: 1, pp 37 – 47.

Choi, J. and Lee, K. (2003), "Risk perception and e-shopping: a cross-cultural study", Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management, **7**: 1, pp 49 – 64.

Dinev, T., Bellotto, M., Hart, P., Colautti, C., Russo, V., Serra, I. (2005), "Internet Users' Privacy Concerns and Attitudes towards Government Surveillance – An Exploratory Study of Cross-Cultural Differences between Italy and the United States", 18th Bled eConference: eIntegration in Action, Bled, Slovenia, June 6 - 8, 2005.

Doi, T. (1971), "The Anatomy of Dependence", Kodansha Europe.

Ishiguro, K. (1986), "An Artist of the Floating World", Faber and Faber.

Jarvenpaa, S. L. and Tractinsky, N. (1999), "Consumer Trust in an Internet Store: A Cross-Cultural Validation", Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, **5**: 2. [Online at: http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol5/issue2/jarvenpaa.html. Accessed 31 August, 2006].

Kitiyadisai, K. (2005), "Privacy Rights and Protection: Foreign Values in Modern Thai Context", Ethics and Information Technology, **7**: 1, pp 17 et seq.

Lash, S. (2002), "Critique of Information", Sage.

McLuhan, M. (1964), "Understanding Media", Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Mizutani, M., Dorsey, J. and Moor, J. H. (2004), "The Internet and Japanese Conception of Privacy", Ethics and Information Technology, 6: ?, pp 121 – 128.

Nakada, M. and Tamura, T. (2005), "Japanese Conceptions of Privacy: An Intercultural Perspective", Ethics and Information Technology, **7**: 1, pp 27 et seq.

Nakane, C. (1970), "Japanese Society", University of California Press.

Orito, Y. and Murata, K. (2005), "Privacy Protection in Japan: Cultural Influence on the Universal Value", ETHICOMP 2005, Linköping, Sweden.

Ozaki, R. (2002), "Housing as a Reflection of Culture: Privatised Living and Privacy in England and Japan", Housing Studies, **17**: 2, pp 209 et seq.

Park, C. and Jun, J-K. (2003), "A cross-cultural comparison of Internet buying behavior: Effects of Internet usage, perceived risks, and innovativeness", International Marketing Review, **20**: 5, pp 534 – 553

Pollach, I., (2005), "A Typology of Communicative Strategies in Online Privacy Policies: Ethics Power and Informed Consent", Journal of Business Ethics **62**: 3, pp 221 – 235.

Shalhoub, Z. K. (2006), "Trust, privacy, and security in electronic business: the case of the GCC countries", Information Management & Computer Security, **14**: 3, pp 270 – 283

Zakaria, N., Stanton, J. M. and Sarkar-Barney, S. T. M. (2003), "Designing and

implementing culturally-sensitive IT applications: The interaction of culture values and privacy issues in the Middle East", Information Technology & People, **16**: 1, pp 49 – 75.

Statistical sources:

http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/eco_gdp-economy-gdp-nominal, accessed 03.02.2007.

http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0004391.html, accessed 03.02.2007.

http://www.krysstal.com/spoken.html, accessed 03.02.2007.

http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm, accessed 03.02.2007.