

Current Topics in Privacy Seminar

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Privacy, Trust, and Safety in Online Platforms: Human-centered Insights and Governance Gaps

Abstract: Online platforms increasingly shape how people communicate and access information, while also exposing them to evolving privacy, security, and safety risks. These risks take many forms, from privacy-invasive targeted advertising and online scams to manipulative Generative AI content. Yet these risks do not emerge or affect people in isolation. They are shaped by users' social and cultural contexts, platform ecosystems, and the policies that govern them. What can we learn about users' privacy and safety on online platforms when we consider these interconnected social, technical, and governance factors together? In this talk, I draw on three studies to examine how contextual norms, platform affordances, and governance shape users' privacy and safety online. First, I examine how users' privacy perceptions of targeted advertising vary globally across the United States and South Asia, and the role of contextual norms in shaping those perceptions. Second, I study user-reported scams on TikTok to understand how platform affordances contribute to online harms and how users respond collectively. Third, I analyze how social media platforms, foundation AI model labs, and advertising services govern manipulative and synthetic content, with particular attention to gaps in protections for young adults. Together, these studies motivate my broader research agenda on designing and governing online platforms in ways that are more context-sensitive, accountable, and protective of users' privacy and safety.

Bio: Dr. Smirity Kaushik (she/her) is a Postdoctoral Researcher in the Department of Computer Science at the George Washington University, where she works at the intersection of human-centered security and privacy, tech policy, and AI safety. She completed her Ph.D. in Information Sciences from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Broadly, her work examines how technology, policy, and contextual norms shape people's online security, privacy, trust, and safety. Her work appears in leading venues in information and computer science, including IEEE S&P, SOUPS, ACM CCS, ACM CHI, and HICSS. Her research has been recognized with the John Karat Usable Privacy and Security Student Research Award (2026) and two SOUPS-IAPP Privacy Awards. She has served as co-principal investigator on projects supported by a Meta Research Grant (2022) and a Google Academic Research Award (2024).