

Privacy as Iconography

[Failing to] Reduce Complex Concepts to Pixels

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The promise of icons as a silver bullet for simplifying the complexity of privacy policies, permissions access, data sharing, and other similarly tangled privacy applications remains unmet. We contend that without legislation, standardization, user-testing, and user-education icons will continue to fail.

As is my habit each semester, I again required the students in my technology ethics class to read a privacy policy, of their choosing. The ensuing discussion, is often a confusing one, questioning why these companies have privacy policies (Are they required to? –Kind of), who actually reads them (No one who isn't forced to? –Basically), if they are actually readable (They are so long, and have so many terms I don't understand: –Yes [Jensen]), and shouldn't we have something better than we had in 1999?

I find this last question the most difficult to answer. It seems that we should, that the early privacy policies of that era shouldn't have stuck quite as firmly as they did. And now, nearly two decades on, the landscape allows users more choice. In the mid 1990's websites didn't have the tailoring or interactivity that they now possess, they couldn't directly access your location, didn't have the ability to log user interactions at anywhere near the current levels, and were unable to store local content. Because of these limitations, users had little control, in most cases the decision did amount to use the website and accept it's terms or not. But now with the modular controls that apps and websites can (and should) allow, there is a greater need to bring users into the conversation.

Doing this requires presenting privacy information in a salient way, that facilitates making decisions. Should this website or application be able to access my contacts? My camera? My blood pressure? Do I want to grant access to my location (Always? When using the app? Only in certain locations?), do I want to grant access to my files and photos (All of them? Only those I actively select? Only those where I am not naked?). An oft-proposed solution to the “problem” of online privacy policies is to replace these policies with a series of icons [Disconnect, Privicons, Raskin]. As of summer 2014, Google has introduced icons into the Google Play Store permissions displays, as part of a grander plan to “simplify” the privacy information that is presented to users [Google]. Google states their

permissions are now “easily identified by icons to help clarify the most important information and capabilities an app can access on your device.”

A Brief History

As far as we are aware, the first complete set of privacy icons was proposed by Mary Rundle at the IGF Athens Privacy Workshop in 2006 [Rundle]. Her seven icons, were not meant to replace privacy policies but as a hook to display common practices.

Efforts from there ballooned, with designers trying to capture an ever larger number of terms. Matthias Mehldau released a set of icons in 2007, modeled visually directly after Creative Commons, with 30 icons [Mehldau]. In 2009, graduate students at Berkeley created KnowPrivacy, to grade and code privacy policies, and came up with a 13 icon scheme to explain their grading [Gomez].

In 2010, Aza Raskin, then at Mozilla, attempted to capture broad support to standardize on a privacy policy format that would be machine readable and displayed through icons [Raskin2]. His icons gained the most widespread attention, though suffered from the issues discussed below. Mozilla has continued their icon work with two more versions. The first was designed with Disconnect and has a limited number of concepts analyzed [Disconnect]. The second group does not have any graphic elements, instead consumers must associate letters with concepts, like “N” for non-personal information and “G” for (geo)location [Lowenthal]. All of these early projects are currently inactive or operating at very low activity (the Mozilla work has not been updated since September 2011), though new projects do continue to arise [Haduong, Moms, Google].

As mentioned above, work on icons has transitioned from traditional privacy policies to smartphone permission models both on Android and, to a lesser

