

Identification vs Authentication - What's the difference?

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One of the complexities in the ongoing discussion about digital identity is the need to distinguish between the processes of identification and the process of authentication. When I identify myself, I communicate to the relying organization, which of the 7 billion odd people in the world I am. And I can do that by using my name or my social security number or my mobile phone number.

That's a very sensitive moment from a privacy point of view. When I authenticate myself, I am enabling the organization to confirm the truth of what I just said. Am I indeed Andrew Bud? Or was it a lie. And that's in the organization's interest. And it's also mine because I have to be protected against impersonation.

The needs of these two processes are quite different. In the case of identification, I need to communicate something which is more or less globally, unique, easy to communicate, but it doesn't have to be particularly secure. Why does it not need to be secure? Because the security is assured by the authentication process.

Authentication doesn't need to distinguish me from billions of amongst billions of people. It just has to confirm that what I'm saying now is true. And it typically does that by matching something that I know or something that I have or something that I am, like my face, against a trusted template. It's completely different process.

When I identify myself, that is a privacy critical moment and therefore you need to give the user agency. You need to enable the user to control that process of identification. That they can do something or not do it as they choose, at the moment of identification. Authentication just needs to be usable, inclusive, effortless, and totally secure.

So let's take faces, for example. Face verification is a fantastic way of authenticating someone. I look at my device, it looks back at me. It's a totally passive and effortless. Virtually immediate, incredibly secure, incredibly powerful. But if you use face matching to identify somebody. Well, now we're in a situation where perhaps somebody walks into a restaurant, the restaurant says, hello, Mr. Bud. I've had my agency taken away. Personally, I find that very creepy. In the debate about face matching, which is an ongoing question of public policy these two ideas are frequently confused. It's very important they're not.

Methods of identification need to give the user agency and they need to protect their privacy. Methods of verification need to protect the user's identity. They need to protect them against impersonation against the theft and reuse of that identity in a

way that is inclusive and effortless. When I authenticate someone, I actually don't need to know anything else about their identity. It can just match their current genuinely present selfie against a trusted template of somebody who previously claimed to be the same person.

So in privacy terms, the authentication process, if it's kept completely separate from the identification process can be marvelously privacy enhancing. And the identification process if it gives the user agency -can give the user a sense of control, a sense that their privacy is being protected because they have choice.

And in the ongoing public debate, it's really important that we separate between these two methods. They have quite different psychological impacts, privacy implications and approaches in public policy terms to the future of the technology.