

Cybersecurity for old people

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It is very common to think that cyber security is important for industry only. However, much less attention has been devoted to the possible fraud and financial, physical and emotional abuse of seniors on or via the internet. So far, most crimes against seniors have taken place outside the home and when people are alone, but it is far from clear if with the rising use of ICT much of the crime and abuse would also take place over the internet. This is why it would be important to create rules and standards to protect old people against all forms of cyber exploitation.

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We are apt to see information security as relevant only to industry, military and governments, as their information can be valuable to others¹. People make their living by trying (by legal and illegal means) to get information about what industries and governments do^{2,3}. However, governments and industry have resources and skills to safeguard their information flow. Ordinary people, especially senior citizens, do not – but should they?

NOTHING TO HIDE?

An old story tells about a poor man whose wife woke him up in the middle of night and said: “We have a thief here”. The man listened and found that his wife was right: there was a thief in the apartment. He was about to jump up, but then he turned his back and said: “Well my love, if he can find more in our flat in the night than we can find on the daytime, let him keep his happiness”. When the thief overheard what the man said, he became embarrassed and went out. Indeed, this attitude is shared by most old people with respect to their privacy and information security. They think no one is interested in them, as the thieves have nothing to gain. Fortunately, many thieves think similarly.

Indeed, could one benefit from breaking the information security and privacy of a senior citizen? Today, senior citizens are often protected by the simple fact that they only use ICT minimally. My students wanted to create a simple social media service for war veterans to contact each other, but few seniors had ICT devices. Yet seniors’ ICT skills are swiftly rising. People retiring now have used computers all of their work life, and many are even computer professionals.

At the same time, practical life is moving to the internet. One cannot contact a medical doctor or interact with tax officials or banks without using the internet. Consequently, privacy and security may suddenly become a real problem, especially considering that some 30 million people have memory problems, and the number is rising⁴. It is easy to imagine that these people are threatened by telemarketing and identity theft, for example. Even today, their caretakers are often caught in various types of fraud – even murders with economic motivations. Why should this abuse change when communication and caretaking are increasingly moving to the internet? It may actually make it easier for criminals to take advantage of old people. The victims are easier to reach, and the traces of the crimes easier to erase.

ONLY FOR CHILDREN?

Much attention is paid to cyber security for children⁵. However, much less attention has been devoted to the possible fraud and financial, physical and emotional abuse of seniors on or via the internet⁶. So far, most crimes against seniors have taken place outside the home and when people are alone, but it is far from clear that with the rising use of ICT much of the crime and abuse would also take place over the internet.

The scientific community should devote more attention to the information security of the 600 million elderly and seniors around the world⁷. It is worth paying specific attention to crime prevention, law enforcement and especially updating legislation.

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