

“They respect your privacy just enough to not have you run away from them.”

Bart Jacobs
in Interview

By Gesa van den Broek, Erik de Water

Bart Jacobs, Professor of Software Security and Correctness at Radboud University, has a twitter account without any followers or tweets and a LinkedIn profile without connections. However, he frequently updates his own website. With InPress, he talks about digital identity, the risks of sharing information online, and how he became a clown working at Radboud University.

Are you active on Social Media websites?
“No, I highly value my privacy. And in that regard, Social Media websites are the worst. I am aware of the importance it has for many people, though. But I don’t feel like using it myself, I don’t need all the chitchat. I have a smartphone but I installed only a very minimal number of apps – and I don’t have Whatsapp even though my children are not happy about that. I have a personal page on the University’s website, for professional reasons. And I think that is a perfectly fine outlet. In my research

area – computer sciences - it is common for researchers to have their own webpage on which they at least make their publica-

“It is important to have an authoritative source.”

tions accessible. I always tell my PhD students to ensure that they post pdf versions of their papers on their website. Nobody here goes to the library to read articles, everything should be online!” ***There may be copyright issues with publishing your research online, but Bart Jacobs is convinced that publishers will eventually lose this battle.*** “Publishers sometimes argue with scientists about copyright issues but I think you should post your papers on your website regardless. In a worst case scenario, you could post the author version, which is not copy-edited by the journal. In addition, I use Google Scholar, which automatically tracks how often my articles get cited. I know colleagues are also looking at this. I would encourage all PhD students to use this service.”

A lot of information can be found about you online. You have your own website and you appear in the media quite

often. Why do you choose to share some information, but not other types of information?

“I mostly share professional activities. I post the slides of presentations I have given, sometimes with links to Youtube movies. I appear in the media regularly, and also frequently post these appearances on my website. *Journalists love to google.* Once you have appeared in the media, it is convenient to put that on your website. And I actively update my website. In this day and age of social media, many things are very informal. It is important to have an authoritative source, which is the official page that you maintain. People who are interested in your work will visit this page.”

What Bart Jacobs does not share online are things that can make him vulnerable to identity theft.

“Many companies, such as insurance companies or medical institutions, only use your date of birth and address as a means of identifying who you are. If you give them this information, they start giving you all sorts of private information pretty easily. Therefore, I try to avoid that my date of birth or address appear online. I have also created my own linkedin- and twitter-accounts, but just so that others can’t create them in my name. I reject all connection requests, even from important people. When I am forced to fill out information about myself, I always fill in nonsense. On LinkedIn, for example, I registered as a clown. The website figured out that I am working at Radboud University, so now my LinkedIn profile says ‘Bart Jacobs, clown at Radboud University’.”

What about people who say: “I don’t care if my internet use is being monitored, I have nothing to hide.”

“That is such an incredibly stupid and naive argument! You would not let me install a camera in your bedroom either, right?”



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**So how is all that information that we share online used?
As an example, Bart Jacobs explains how behavioural
targeting works:**

"Companies are not transparent about how they use the data they collect. But we all know that when you visit a webshop and look for a yellow dress, you will see yellow dresses on other websites for weeks to come. This is called behavioral targeting. It also happens when you book airplane tickets, for instance. Last year I was planning to book a vacation to Italy and looked up tickets on-line. Over the course of the day, the price of

the same plane ticket increased from €49 to more than €100. Then I used software that makes internet users anonymous by hiding their IP-address and managed to book the flight for €49. The next day, I tried to replicate all of this together with colleagues but we couldn't do it. This shows how difficult it is to find out how these sites actually operate. But they don't just keep track of your search behavior, they also keep track of what you bought previously, and the type of computer you use to visit their website. *When you use an expensive Apple computer during on-line shopping, prices are higher.* Many things on the internet are free, because your personal data is being recorded and used for commercial reasons."

**How do you view the future of social media? Will the trend
of sharing more and more information online continue?**

"People used to say: Knowledge equals power. But in this day and age, information equals power. When you have information about other people, you can make money. Social media are not designed for you, they are designed to squeeze you out and sell information to advertisers. Companies promote the message: 'Privacy is over, deal with it, you have to be transparent'. This is absurd. They themselves are far from being transparent about how they use the data they collect! These companies respect your privacy just enough to not have you run away from them."

**Can we have a bit more on....
Cyber security?**

Bart Jacob's research concentrates on correctness and security properties of software (according to an authoritative source - his website). Therefore, we could not refrain from asking some questions about data security, too.

How do you protect your communication?

At our department, we study sensitive topics, so we encrypt our e-mails to each other. We certainly don't use gmail to discuss our research and we use a secure e-mail system with which we cannot read our e-mail on public wifi.

How should PhD students store their data?

On a password-protected computer, of which a daily back-up is made automatically each night, like in our department. This does not only protect you from losing data (which is obviously terrible for a researcher), but also helps protect the confidentiality of the data. For particularly sensitive data, I would say: encrypt the data. There is free software available to do that, and if you can't do it yourself, you should ask an IT-specialist. I think you should be aware of the sensitive nature of your data. Funding agencies demand from researchers to carefully store their data nowadays, which means you shouldn't put it in dropbox. Working with computers has become such a standard part of a researcher's skill set, that it could receive some more attention. Especially at faculties where it is less obvious to be computer savvy. In our department, we expect everybody to be able to build their own website, we don't even explain how to do that. Perhaps other research institutes should provide PhD students with a webpage on which they could add their publications. They might also give them some information on copyright and related issues.



And the pressure to use social media increases...

"When you are not visible on Google as a company, your existence is threatened. When you are going for a job interview and potential employers can't find you on Facebook, that might be thought of as suspicious: Do you have anything to hide? I used to ask my children when they were younger: 'What is more true, what they

"Do we know whether Google is right-wing or Yahoo is left-wing?"

tell you on the news or in the commercials?' On social media,

it is difficult to distinguish between facts and opinions. Newspapers are clear about that, they have special opinion sections, and they are known to be left-wing or right-wing. But do we know whether Google is right-wing or Yahoo is left-wing?"

The interview was conducted in Dutch and translated by the interviewer.

Professor Jacobs has held a number of inspiring talks, which you can find on his website <http://www.cs.ru.nl/~bart/>. We highly recommend the talk that he gave at the Treaties of Nijmegen ceremony. Don't miss the one reason why he might join Facebook after all!

Update from September 12: VOX reports that professor Jacobs has received a grant from NWO, KPN and SURFnet to study ways to protect our online privacy. Congratulations, this is good news for all of us internet users!



Cartoon by Gesa Kappen, www.facebook.com/lifeofanillustratingscientist

BOX INTERVIEW #2

**Adam Lobel**

Name: Adam Lobel

Position: PhD Student

Research topic: Positive effects of gaming on mental health.

Website: <https://twitter.com/GrowingUpGaming>

Uses social media to publish movies of his talks and to get in contact with gamers, and to twitter on ideas and research.

How do you use social media?

I have a youtube account on which I post talks that I gave about my research, and I post links to interesting papers and research ideas on twitter. This allows me to use twitter as a sort of logbook of ideas.

My followers are mostly other researchers and gamers. Recently, one of the big names from my field of research started following my twitter account.

What are the benefits of your online activities for your research?

I have received invitations to give talks through my twitter contacts, and I used a video message on youtube to recruit participants for my research.

What do you think about professional networks like LinkedIn?

LinkedIn seems to be very popular in the Netherlands but it is not so well-known in the US (Ed: Adam comes from the US). I have the impression that it is not used as much in the academic world as in business. So it might be more useful if you want to continue your career outside the academic world after your PhD.

What is your advice to a beginning social media user?

Use the same name for different social media accounts and link them to each other. Put your twitter account on your business card and on the first slide of your presentations. Like this, people can more easily find you online.