

Two New Online Questionnaires Measure “Digital Hygiene” – the Ability to Use New Technologies Safely and Privately

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Abstract

Most online users – especially young people – are unaware of the potential that online platforms have to track and analyze personal data, to suppress content systematically, and to manipulate thinking and behavior. In the US, many school systems teach “health hygiene,” but none, to our knowledge currently teach what might be called “digital hygiene” – how to use new technologies safely and privately. Since 2013, our research group has identified, studied, and quantified about a dozen new methods of manipulation made possible by the internet, and we have also developed a nationwide system that captures and analyzes the personalized, ephemeral content that tech companies are sending to both children and adults. Our investigations have made us increasingly concerned about the high levels of surveillance, censorship, and manipulation that are now common on the internet – dangers that most people are entirely unaware of. Over the past year, we have also created two questionnaires that measure 11 competencies people need to protect themselves online, each accessible at <https://MyDigitalHygiene.com>. In the present study, we have collected data that begin the process of assessing the reliability and validity of these two test instruments, each of which contains questions that can be answered “Yes” or “No.” A diverse group of 258 people completed the questionnaires. The first is a “mini” version of the questionnaire that contains just 10 items and can be completed in less than a minute. On that test, the mean score was only 56.7%, with people scoring lowest (28.7%) on a question about clearing one’s browser history. On the full test, which contains 110 items, the mean score was 66.0%, with people scoring lowest (45.9%) on a question about using VPNs. On the full test, scores were relatively good predictors of people’s answers to criterion questions, and Cronbach’s alpha suggested high internal consistency reliability. As we continue to improve and validate these tests, we are also reaching out to school systems to explore possibilities for teaching digital hygiene in middle and high schools.