caitlin McGetrick’s graphic design senior thesis project
The Power of Privacy is an informational and engaging mobile-oriented website that aims to educate internet users and smartphone owners about digital privacy. It covers the topics of how our cellphones collect data from us, why it matters, and what we can do to help prevent it from happening. Because of the technical and possibly intimidating nature of the topic, I wanted the visual language of the project to be engaging and approachable. I coded the site using HTML, CSS, and JavaScript. My hope is that viewers come away with a basic understanding of the current problems that we are facing in relation to digital privacy, and are motivated to take steps to protect their own.
INSPIRATION

Our privacy is valuable. It allows us to make our own choices about the parts of ourselves that we wish to share, and lets us control what others know about us. However, it is something that has become increasingly threatened in the digital age. Massive amounts of personal data are being collected from us without our knowledge or consent while we use the internet and our digital devices. Privacy is a fundamental human right, and in our digital society it is something that needs to be protected. I ended up selecting the topic of digital privacy for my thesis project because its something that I personally wanted to learn more about. It is always in the news, and I think it is something that is going to become increasingly relevant with the expansion of technology in our lives. I thought choosing it as the topic for my project was the perfect way to both learn more about a topic I was interested in and create something that I thought was important.
EARLY BRAINSTORMING & AUDIENCE

From the very beginning stages of the project I knew that I wanted to create a website. However, I knew next to nothing about the topic of digital privacy, and if I was planning on teaching others about it I figured that I should know what I was talking about. I found out pretty quickly in the early stages of my research that digital privacy is a really really broad topic. I would not be using my time very effectively if I tried to learn everything there is to know about it. I decided to choose one specific thing for my website to focus on, this way I could go more into depth on it. To narrow down the topic, I really had to think about what I wanted the purpose, and audience, of my site to be. The project began as something that I wanted to do for myself, and in a broader sense I wanted it to be for people like me - people who also want to know more about digital privacy but don’t really know where to start learning about it. I had all my friends in mind as I was planning out my project; I wanted to make something that they could all understand and maybe find a bit useful. The obvious answer to me seemed like it would be making it about cellphones, something nearly everyone uses. We rely on them so much and they’ve become so ubiquitous today that we don’t think about how they could be negatively affecting our digital privacy.
Research was a really important part of my project because I was providing information to others and I had to make sure it was all correct/factual. One issue I was wrestling with when writing the articles for my site was making sure the information I was providing was accurate and easy to understand. These sources were really useful for me because they laid out the information in a way that was easy for me to understand, and in turn I was able to make the content I wrote easy for others to understand.
Writing was the first step in the process of making my project. I had to decide what I wanted to write, how I wanted to format it, and what topics I wanted to cover. I ended up choosing to write three articles that covered the topics of how our cellphones collect data from us, why it matters that it’s happening, and what we can do to prevent it. Because of how much research I had done previously, I found that I had a lot of info to pull from, and these are some of my early brainstorms/ideations for what I wanted to write.
The Power of Privacy Process Book • Research

WRITING

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The visual language of my site was the next step to tackle after writing the content for it. Since my topic was about cellphones, I decided to make the website mobile-only. Most of the reading and internet browsing that people do these days is on their phones anyway, and it was especially relevant to my project topic. Finding the right direction for the visual language of my project was one of the biggest obstacles that I faced throughout the whole process.
One of the first ideas I had for the visual language of my project was a “techy” vibe that kind of emulated the sources that I had been researching and gathering information from (*cough* New York Times Privacy Project *cough*). I think the reason that I was drawn to it at first is because it was something that I personally found really cool, along with the fact that it was a recurring visual theme of some projects that I really liked. After initially talking with Amy about it, I was encouraged to explore something different and possibly subversive, because the tech look could come across as a bit intimidating, which is not the goal of my project.
VISUAL LANGUAGE BRAINSTORMING
VISUAL LANGUAGE BRAINSTORMING

I wanted to come up with a visual metaphor for the topic of data collection to make this conceptual thing that we can't see happening a bit easier to understand. Most of the stuff I was coming up with at first was really creepy, like a stalker-y vibe with dark colors, which is definitely an angle that this topic easily lends itself to. However, even though I love creepy things, I didn't think that would be an effective visual language either. The purpose of my project isn't to scare people, and I think a creepy approach would have the opposite effect of what I wanted, which was to be approachable educational tool.
FORMLESS MASS KNOWS EVERYTHING ABOUT YOU

HOW DOES MY CELLPHONE COLLECT DATA FROM ME?

How much does your cellphone know about you?

It could be a lot more than you think.
The Power of Privacy Process Book  •  Visual Language

VISUAL LANGUAGE BRAINSTORMING

I revisited the idea of thinking about my topic in a more metaphorical sense again, and the first thing that came to mind for me was one of those maps that detectives use in movies to try to track down the culprit. That is kind of what is being done to us – we are at the center of this web and our online activity is being tracked and connected like pushpins and string. From there I started thinking more about “spy” related stuff (footprints, magnifying glasses, fingerprints, ransom letters), and I thought it worked as an apt metaphor for what is happening. I decided to use primary colors because to me that seemed the most non-intimidating.
This was the “final” inspiration mood board that I made after deciding on a direction for my visual language. It ended up evolving a lot while I was actually creating the illustrations and layout, but this was the vibe that I was trying to go for. This is very “vintage-y” and mine ended up a lot more modern looking.
At the midterm review I had all 3 articles written and 2 articles fully mocked up in PDF form. I displayed my Figma board that showed the iterations that I went through while designing the final look. I got a lot of good feedback - people really liked the primary color palette that I chose, and they thought the format of how each sentence sort of had its own color block made it engaging and easy to follow. I also was given the idea to turn the website into a zine! That way it can be displayed in both physical and digital form.
I also had a meeting with my secondary honors advisor, Professor Anne Galperin. She gave me the idea of putting my project in a video format, with a voiceover and text/my illustrations going across the screen. She also brought up some ideas about audience that I hadn’t initially thought of while designing the visual language. Even though it wasn’t my intent, the look that I ended up is quite kid-friendly. She suggested that I get feedback on the articles from someone who is younger than me, and someone who is older than me to see what their reactions would be.
OBSTACLES

I was experiencing a “pit of despair” moment every other day in the beginning of the spring semester. The entire fall semester I focused on research and abstract planning, and in the spring I had to get to work right away. Figuring out what I wanted to write about, the process of actually writing the articles, coming up with the visual language, and designing the first article were really really hard. Once I had the articles written and one of them fully designed, things got a bit easier. I knew what I had to do, and there was a specific direction I was headed in. Coding everything was actually the easiest part. However, I had planned in the beginning of my process to involve a lot more JavaScript in my site. I wanted things to be interactive and have a sort of “scrollytelling” mechanic. I wasn’t able to get to that at the end of the semester, but if I were to continue with this that would be something I wanted to look into. I want to learn how to code with JavaScript just in general, and I think this is a great medium to figure it out with. The best way to learn how to code is to have a project in mind that you want to accomplish, and I think I can use this project as a way to teach me how to use JavaScript (similar to how this project taught me about digital privacy!)
The resources page on my blog was my favorite part. I put links to anything that I found inspirational or informative or interesting in relation to web design or digital privacy.
What does the phrase “digital privacy” mean to you? It's not only about how much information we choose to share about ourselves through social media. It also refers to the information that is being taken from us unknowingly as we use the internet and go on our cellphones.

Nearly every app on your phone collects information about you.

How do cellphone apps collect information from me?

How can I protect my digital privacy?

Why is privacy so important?

and why is it such a big deal that this data is being collected from me?
Having a general idea of which apps collect information about you is a lot better than being completely in the dark.

This is a complicated issue that doesn't have a perfect solution.

Privacy is fundamentally about power.

About their citizens personal lives mitigates the risk that they will use that information to suppress dissenting voices or try to prevent them from exercising their other democratic rights.

Digital privacy also ensures our First Amendment rights.

It is vital for a functioning democracy that citizens feel they can express their ideas without fear of retaliation.
What does the phrase "digital privacy" mean to you? It's not only about how much information we choose to share about ourselves through social media. It also refers to the information that is being taken from us unknowingly as we use the internet and go.

Our privacy is valuable, and it's never too late to start treating it that way.
FINAL WORK - ZINES!

The Power of Privacy Process Book • Final Project
The show was so awesome :) Something that really stood out to me was how much people liked touching the physical things on my table. I had the zines out as well as the link/qr code to my site up on the monitor and people were choosing to look at the zines instead of viewing the site. It could be just because of the convenience of something being right there on the table/not wanting to take out their phone or look at their phone while standing in front of me, but still I thought it was interesting. People also seemed to enjoy flipping through my print portfolio, so I was glad that I didn't try to have my portfolio up on my computer. I also didn't really intend for the zines to be giveaways but people were taking them anyway haha. Its the same information that's on my website!! But people seemed to want a tiny book instead of a thing they could look at on their phones.

Overall such a fun and very tiring experience. I got to talk to a ton of people about digital privacy and I even got a book recommendation! During the process of making the site I sometimes felt like I was the only person in the world who cared about this topic and that no one would care enough to look at my website, but I got a lot of comments at the show about how I picked a great topic! And that made me feel very happy. I also loved commiserating with people about how our digital privacy is gone and society is doomed (but I had to put on an optimistic face For The People...
THESIS SHOW SETUP
REFLECTION - WHAT'S NEXT...?

This project has been one of the most rewarding experiences I’ve ever had. I’ve never worked on a project over such a long period of time, and I really enjoyed the whole process. I got to make something that I think is important and that I am super proud of :) Plus, I have the ability to easily add more articles that cover different aspects of digital privacy (more reading and writing and designing and learning yay!), and I have a playground to mess around with JavaScript (even more learning! yay!). I’m so grateful for this experience and I’d love to do more long-form projects like this in the future.