

A Cyber Safety Parable (YouTube, CC Available)

You've probably heard that you need to be careful about what you post online. Well, here's a story that will explain why. Once upon a time, a nice fellow named Tim uploaded a picture of himself to his favorite social network. It wasn't a bad picture, maybe a little goofy, but innocent enough. Little did Tim know that this photo would be his downfall. When Tim uploaded his photo to the internet, it was stored in a few places. One of these was the server of Tim's favorite social network, which allowed all of his friends to see it. Another was a government server that picked up lots of information from the internet in case it could be useful down the line. And the third was the server of an identity theft crime ring. Back on the social network, a few of Tim's friends gave their approval to his picture, but most ignored it. Meanwhile, the social network made his data available to an advertising firm. They noticed the Frisbee in Tim's photo, and started sending him Frisbee ads, hoping that he'd buy more Frisbees. Unfortunately, he would not be able to, because of what happened next. You see, the identity theft crime ring liked Tim's photo much more than his friends did. That's because it showed his house in the background. One of the pieces of data in the image file was the exact location where the photo was taken, allowing them to figure out Tim's address. Now, this crime ring had already collected some other information about Tim that he had unwittingly posted online, including his phone number and social security number. So they called Tim's bank, pretended to be him, and tricked the bank into resetting his password using all of the information they had. Needless to say, they transferred all of Tim's money into their own pockets. They also gained access to his email accounts and sent his friends malware that stole their bank account information. This was bad for Tim's social life. To console himself over the loss of his friends, Tim took a vacation halfway across the world, and by strange coincidence chose the very country that had intercepted his photo. Unfortunately for poor Tim, the nifty design on his shorts was also the flag of a rebel army trying to overthrow that country's government, and he was identified as a possible threat. So he was pulled aside at security and denied entry. Tim's story is pretty much a worst-case scenario, and is almost certainly not what's going to happen the next time you post a picture online. But each of these things does happen to people on a daily basis...except for maybe the rebel army bit. Information that you post publicly can be stored by anyone who finds it, and your private communications might be intercepted and read by advertisers, news outlets, governments and criminals alike. In fact, over ten million Americans have their identities stolen each year. So try to be careful about what information you post online, keep all of your software up to date, and make secure passwords that are different for each site you visit. These problems will probably never go away – unless we invent a completely secure way of communicating and sharing with each other online. Sorry, Tim.