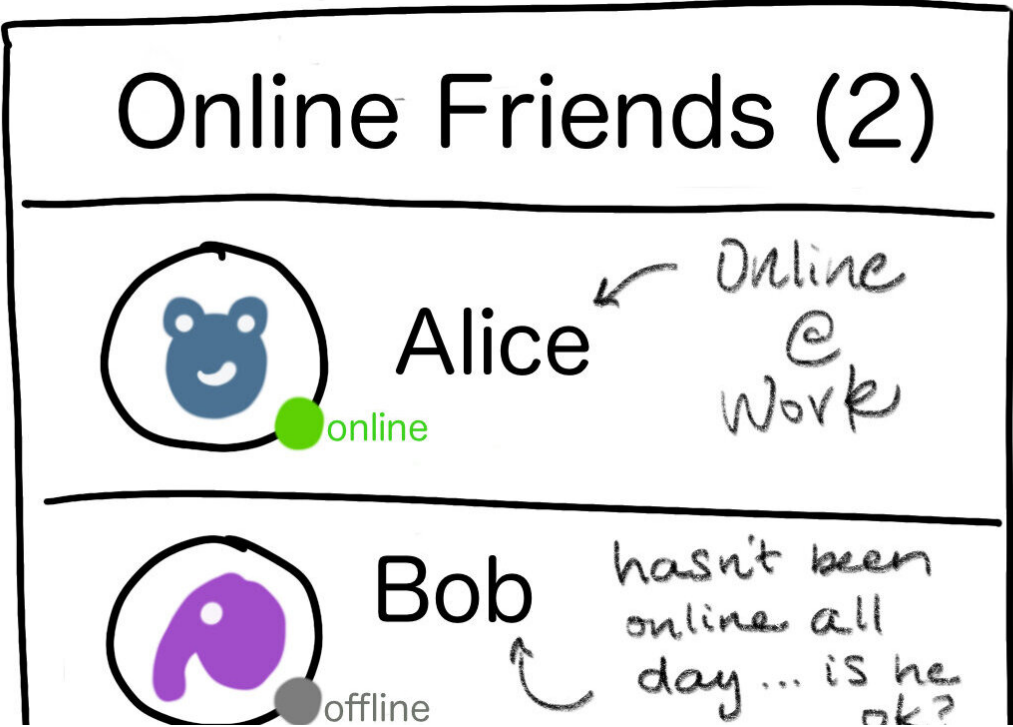# Online status indicators during a pandemic: do they work?

May 1 2020, by Daniel Tkacik

A recent study has found that online status indicators have led to some odd user behavior. Credit: Camille Cobb

For the past few months, millions of Americans have been working from their homes in an effort to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus. They're using platforms such as Slack, Discord, or Hangouts to communicate, and instead of checking whether someone's office door is

open to ask a question, they're checking each other's online status indicators.

These online status indicators have led to some odd behaviors, according to findings in a new study.

"People do things like avoid getting online at night because they don't want people to know they were up that late, or they go offline really fast when they realize someone they don't want to talk to just got online," says Camille Cobb, a postdoctoral researcher in Carnegie Mellon's CyLab who conducted most of the study previously as a researcher at the University of Washington. "It would be nice if these apps supported us so that we could do what we want instead of shifting our behavior."

Cobb and her co-authors would have presented their study, "User Experiences with Online Status Indicators," at this week's CHI 2020 conference, had the conference not been cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic.

In their study, the team asked 200 participants ranging from 19 to 64 years of age to identify apps that they use from a list of 44 apps with online status indicators. Participants were then asked whether or not the apps they chose shared information about their online statuses with their network or not.

Participants were not nearly as aware of the presence of online status indicators as they should be. While nearly 90 percent of participants correctly identified at least one app they used as having such features, 63 percent were not sure about at least one app and 36 percent answered incorrectly for at least one app.

"If apps are going to have these types of features that share information about the users to their networks, they need to be designed in such a way

that users are fully-aware that information is being broadcast," Cobb says.

The researchers also asked participants to track the amount of time it took them to locate the settings to turn off the online indicators. For apps that had such settings, 28 percent of participants gave up before finding them, and for apps that did not offer such controls, 23 percent of users mistakenly thought they had turned the online status indicators off.

"People just don't have a lot of control over broadcasting this information to their networks, whether the settings allow for control or not," Cobb says.

Cobb also believes that the status indicators should have more options for statuses, instead of limited options like "Online," or "Offline," or in some apps, "Idle." One idea is likening status options to how the appearance of an office and its door might indicate status.

"If someone is in their office and their light is off with their door closed, it would be very weird if I knocked on the door, barged in and said, 'I need to ask you a question,'" Cobb says. "Likewise, if the light is on but the door is closed, it's probably still not a great time to ask them for something unless it's an emergency. But if the light is on and the door is cracked open, it's probably fine to knock. If the light is on and the door is wide open, then it should be perfectly fine."

If anything, the coronavirus pandemic has inadvertently launched a massive user-test on apps' online status indicators. Cobb hopes app companies come out the other side with indicators that allow flexibility, control, and the ability for us to resume our normal online behavior.

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