Poster: Forgetting the Forgotten, Concealing Content Deletion from Persistent Observers

**Title:** Lethe: Conceal Content Deletion from Persistent Observers [1]

**Authors:** M. Minaei, M. Mondal, P. Loiseau, K. Gummadi, and A. Kate

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**Abstract** Most social platforms offer mechanisms allowing users to delete their posts, and a significant fraction of users exercise this right to be forgotten. However, ironically, users’ attempt to reduce attention to sensitive posts via deletion, in practice, attracts unwanted attention from stalkers specifically to those (deleted) posts. Thus, deletions may leave users more vulnerable to attacks on their privacy in general. Users hoping to make their posts forgotten face a “damned if I do, damned if I don’t” dilemma. Many are shifting towards ephemeral social platform like Snapchat, which will deprive us of important user-data archival. In the form of intermittent withdrawals, we present, Lethe, a novel solution to this problem of (really) forgetting the forgotten. If the next-generation social platforms are willing to give up the uninterrupted availability of non-deleted posts by a very small fraction, Lethe provides privacy to the deleted posts over long durations. In presence of Lethe, an adversarial observer becomes unsure if some posts are permanently deleted or just temporarily withdrawn by Lethe; at the same time, the adversarial observer is overwhelmed by a large number of falsely flagged undeleted posts. To demonstrate the feasibility and performance of Lethe, we analyze large-scale real data about users’ deletion over Twitter and thoroughly investigate how to choose time duration distributions for alternating between temporary withdrawals and resurrections of non-deleted posts. We find a favorable trade-off between privacy, availability and adversarial overhead in different settings for users exercising their right to delete. We show that, even against an ultimate adversary with an uninterrupted access to the entire platform, Lethe offers deletion privacy for up to 3 months from the time of deletion, while maintaining content availability as high as 95% and keeping the adversarial precision to 20%.

**References**

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Mohsen Minaei\textsuperscript{1}, Mainack Mandal\textsuperscript{2,3}, Patrick Loiseau\textsuperscript{2}, Krishna Gummadi\textsuperscript{2}, Aniket Kate\textsuperscript{1}
\textsuperscript{1}Purdue University, USA \textsuperscript{2}MPI-SWS, Germany \textsuperscript{3}University of Chicago, USA

1. Data Enormity & Data Exposure

People freely talk about their personal life and opinions on online social platforms, causing long-term exposure to intended recipients and unintended data scavengers.

2. Privacy Issues and Deletions

Privacy Attacks.
- Harassment and blackmail of victims for their sensitive posts
- Given the enormity of accessible data, large scale mining may not be economical for the adversary

Data Deletions.
- Users request to withdraw their data are honored by several platforms and archives
- Streisand effect: an attempt to hide some information has the unintended consequence of bringing particular attention of public to it
- Data deletions make the data scavengers task significantly easy!

"damned if I do, damned if I don’t"

3. State of the Art and Problems

User Initiated Deletion
Age-based Withdrawal
Inactivity-based withdrawal
Problem
Streisand effect
Inability to predict the right time
No archived history of data

4. Lethe: Intermittent Withdrawals

Our proposal employs an intermittent withdrawal mechanism using two time distributions: an up distribution, and a down distribution.

5. Security Goals in Lethe

Deletion Privacy
- Uncertainty about a post being deleted or just temporarily withdrawn.
- Defined as a likelihood ratio (LR) between a post being in a down duration vs. the post being deleted at a particular time.

Platform availability
- Average availability of a post within a period.
- Providing privacy guarantees to users while obtaining high availability.

Adversarial Overhead
- # of non-deleted posts falsely flagged as deleted (false-positives) that adversary has to investigate along with the detected actual deleted posts (true-positives).
- Captured by the precision measure, precision = true-positives / (true-positives + false-positives)

6. Distribution Selection

Picking geometric and negative binomial distributions as the up and down distribution, achieves good privacy guarantees, and reasonable availability.

7. Experimental Results

Evaluated the effectiveness of Lethe with interaction data from Twitter.
- Showing the trade-off between privacy, availability and the adversarial overhead.

Our notion of privacy is simplified to Decision Threshold: adversary’s wait duration to make a decision about a post being hidden or deleted.