

Privacy Implications of Fast, Mobile Internet Access

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Much of the internet's impact on American society has been positive, as people are able to connect with each other and with information much more efficiently than ever before. But cracks in the foundation of trust have been widening as more people have bad experiences in their online travels.

The Pew Internet & American Life Project currently estimates that 75% of adults and 90% of teenagers in the U.S. go online. Half of American adults have broadband access at home and 80% of adults have a cell phone.

Broadband and wireless users don't just surf through the online world, they shape it. They are more intense than other users about their online communications and media use: uploading, downloading, sharing, and trading.

Our research finds that many Americans are jumping into the participatory Web without considering all the implications. If nothing really bad has happened to someone, they tend neither to worry about their personal information nor to take steps to limit the amount of information that can be found about them online. On the other hand, if someone has had a bad experience with embarrassing or inaccurate information being posted online, they are more likely to take steps to limit the availability of personal information.¹

This finding dovetails with our previous work related to spyware – software that covertly tracks a user as they navigate the net. Internet users who said they had not encountered spyware were less likely to view it as a serious threat and more likely to say it's just part of life online. In contrast, internet users who did have a bad experience with malware were more likely to take steps to limit their exposure by changing their behavior. For example, they stopped downloading software, stopped downloading from peer-to-peer networks, and/or stopped visiting particular websites.²

Web 2.0, or the participatory web, has also raised new questions about the definition of “personal information.” Are your searches regarding your ex-boyfriend something you would like to keep private? The five most popular search engines routinely archive a user’s search terms, their computer’s address, and the unique identifier for their Web browser for 13-18 months.³ Ask.com is the only company to offer an “eraser” for those revealing key words.⁴ How about the cute page you created on Facebook but then deleted after graduation? It may be more difficult to delete it than you thought.⁵

One group identified in our research, the “Confident Creatives,” who comprise 17% of adult internet users, express the least concerns about their “digital footprints.” This, the youngest of the four groups we identified, are frequent posters of potentially personal content but they are also confident in their ability to limit and control the amount of information available about themselves. Nearly three in four (71%) say that the amount of information they find when they search their own names is about what they expected.⁶

More generally, consumers are now expressing a more consistent interest in control over personal information: for, example, 59% of adults have refused to provide information to a business or company because they thought it was not really necessary or was too personal. Still, many people are uploading their work histories to LinkedIn, or their photos to Flickr, or their personal musings to MySpace, choosing to connect their online identities with these key pieces of personal information.

We have seen in past research that the threat of spyware has consequences for user behavior. Now we are watching for other consequences as Americans upgrade to fast, mobile, participatory internet access.

¹ Digital Footprints (Pew Internet Project, December 2007

http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/229/report_display.asp

² Spyware (Pew Internet Project, July 2005). http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/160/report_display.asp

³ Center for Democracy & Technology: “Search Privacy Practices: A Work in Progress.” August 2007.

⁴ See <http://sp.ask.com/en/docs/about/askeraser.shtml#1>

⁵ Maria Aspan, “How Sticky Is Membership on Facebook? Just Try Breaking Free” and “Quitting Facebook Gets Easier,” *New York Times*, February 11 and 12, 2008.

⁶ Digital Footprints. http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/229/report_display.asp