

Internet users give up privacy in exchange for trust

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With public concern over online fraud, new research, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, has revealed that internet users will reveal more personal information online if they believe they can trust the organisation that requests the information. ‘Even people who have previously demonstrated a high level of caution regarding online privacy will accept losses to their privacy if they trust the recipient of their personal information’ says Dr Adam Joinson, who led the study.

The findings of the study are vital for those aiming to create online services that pose a potential privacy threat, such as Government agencies involved in developing ID cards. The project found that even those people who declared themselves unconcerned about privacy would soon become opposed to ID cards if the way that they were asked for information made them feel that their privacy was threatened.

The ‘Privacy and Self-Disclosure Online’ project is the first of its kind, in that rigorous methods were used to measure internet users actual behaviour. Dr Joinson explains; ‘For the first time we have research which actually analyses what people do online, rather than just looking at what they say they do.’

56 percent of internet users stated that they have concerns about privacy when they are online. The central issue was whether websites were seen as particularly trustworthy – or untrustworthy – causing users to alter their behaviour. When a website is designed to look trustworthy, people are willing to accept privacy violations. But, the same actions by an

untrustworthy site leads to people behaving in a much more guarded manner.

In addition, the researchers looked at how the wording of questions and the design of response options further influenced levels of self-disclosure. If the response ‘I prefer not to say’ appears at the top of an options list, users are far less likely to disclose information. Similarly, if given the opportunity to remain vague in their responses, for instance in choosing how wide the scale that represents their salary is, they are more likely to opt for less disclosure – in this case, users tended to opt for a broad scale, such as £10,000 - £50,000 per year.

‘One of the most interesting aspects of our findings,’ says Dr Joinson, ‘is that even people who genuinely have a high level of concern regarding privacy online may act in a way that is contrary to their stated attitudes when they come across a particular set of conditions.’

The implications of this are wide ranging. Many services now require a level of online disclosure. According to this research, how a user assesses the trustworthiness of a website may have a real impact on the success of that service. In addition, research findings will be used to guide policy regarding how the public can be encouraged to make informed choices regarding online privacy.

The project has targeted a number of groups who can benefit from the findings, including health professionals, higher education professionals and survey bodies.

Source: Economic & Social Research Council

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