

Study: Young adults do care about online privacy

April 15 2010, By BARBARA ORTUTAY , AP Technology Writer

(AP) -- All the dirty laundry younger people seem to air on social networks these days might lead older Americans to conclude that today's tech-savvy generation doesn't care about privacy.

Such an assumption fits happily with declarations that privacy is dead, as online marketers and social sites such as Facebook try to persuade people to share even more about who they are, what they are thinking and where they are at any given time.

But it's not quite true, a new study finds. Despite mounds of anecdotes about college students sharing booze-chugging party photos, posting raunchy messages and badmouthing potential employers online, young adults generally care as much about privacy as older Americans.

The report, from researchers at the University of California, Berkeley and the University of Pennsylvania, is among the first quantitative studies looking at young people's attitudes toward privacy as government officials and corporate executives alike increasingly grapple with such issues.

"It is going to counter a lot of assumptions that have been made about young adults and their attitudes toward privacy," said Mary Madden, senior researcher at the Pew Internet and American Life Project. She was not part of the study but reviewed the report for The Associated Press ahead of Thursday's release.

Among the findings:

- Eighty-eight percent of people of all ages said they have refused to give out information to a business because they thought it was too personal or unnecessary. Among young adults, 82 percent have refused, compared with 85 percent of those over 65.
- Most people - 86 percent - believe that anyone who posts a photo or video of them on the Internet should get their permission first, even if that photo was taken in public. Among young adults 18 to 24, 84 percent agreed - not far from the 90 percent among those 45 to 54.
- Forty percent of adults ages 18 to 24 believe executives should face jail time if their company uses someone's personal information illegally - the same as the response among those 35 to 44 years old.

The survey, based on a 2009 telephone survey of 1,000 Americans 18 and older, did find some areas with generational differences in attitudes. For example, while 69 percent of all respondents said a company should be fined more than \$2,500 for privacy violations, only 54 percent of those 18 to 24 years old thought the fine should be that steep.

Even so, the majority of young people generally agreed with their older counterparts in wanting more privacy, not less.

"Yes, there are some young people who are posting racy photographs and personal information. But those anecdotes might not represent what the average young person is doing online," said Chris Hoofnagle, co-author of the study and director of information privacy programs at the Berkeley Center for Law and Technology.

Although they grew up in the digital age, young people know surprisingly little about their rights to online privacy, the study found.

They seem more confident than older adults that the government would protect them, even though U.S. privacy laws offer few such safeguards.

The lack of knowledge about the law, coupled with an online environment that encourages people to share [personal information](#), may be one reason young people can seem careless about privacy, according to the study, which was conducted in July 2009 and has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3.6 percentage points.

There is also some evidence that, by virtue of their age, adolescents and young adults' brains are hard-wired toward risky behavior, the report said, citing past psychological studies.

The researchers suggest that lawmakers and educators should not assume that young adults do not care about privacy and therefore don't need protections.

Rather, they say, "policy discussions should acknowledge that the current business environment ... sometimes encourages [young adults](#) to release personal data in order to enjoy social inclusion even while in their most rational moments they may espouse more conservative norms."

Yet that doesn't mean you shouldn't believe all the stories about younger people prolifically posting photos of their beer-guzzling, scantily clad selves.

"But there is not enough research to find out (whether) older people do the same thing," said Joseph Turow, professor at Penn's Annenberg School for Communication. "Older adults, they may not show up naked, but they may be releasing other kinds of (personal) information."

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