

Australians concerned for online privacy: study

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Australians have a high level of internet use but are wary of websites that collect too much information about their visitors, a large-scale University of Queensland survey has revealed.

Conducted by Dr Mark Andrejevic from UQ's Centre for Critical and Cultural Studies, the nationwide telephone survey of more than 1100 people researched Australians' [attitudes](#) toward the collection and use of their [personal information](#) for commercial purposes.

More than 90 per cent of the survey's [respondents](#) supported regulations that would allow them to control the capture and use of their personal information online.

They would like companies to be legally required to notify people at the time when they are collecting personal information; to provide users with the ability to “opt out” of having their information collected; and to allow users to request their personal information be deleted.

[Australians](#) also overwhelmingly support the creation of a legal right to [privacy](#) – a measure recommended by a 2008 Law Reform Commission Report that has received recent attention in the wake of the News of the World phone hacking scandals.

“In the online world, users are increasingly being asked to consent to the collection of detailed, personal information in exchange for access to online services,” said Dr Andrejevic, who is the chief investigator of the

Personal Information Project.

“But most of us have very little idea about what information is being collected and how it's being used so we cannot provide informed consent.”

Major credit card companies have recently announced plans to use customers' purchasing data to target online advertisements.

Dr Andrejevic said companies like Facebook and Google had recently prompted privacy concerns about the ways in which they collect and use personal information.

Google has announced it will combine user information collected from across the many different services it operates, including its search engine, email service, and popular video site, YouTube.

This information is used to target advertising and content to users, but the majority of Australians (56 per cent) do not approve of having advertising targeted to them based on personal information.

A larger majority — 64 per cent — do not want news stories tailored to them based on their personal information.

To avoid the collection of their information, 69 per cent of the surveyed respondents reported they had refused to use an application or Web site because it collected too much personal information, with 79 per cent simply refusing to provide personal information.

“Companies know more and more about us, but we know very little about what they're doing with that information,” Dr Andrejevic said.

"The more they collect, the less we know.

“There's a real imbalance in the way the digital economy works.

“As the level of information collection increase in the digital era, democracy and personal autonomy need to be protected.” .

The survey results also showed that more than 60 per cent of respondents rarely or never read Web site privacy policies.

“Online privacy policies tend to be vague about how information is being used and are often subject to change without warning," he said.

"They also rarely give you any options – you either have to accept the policies or you can't gain access.

“The results are interesting and timely given recent discussions about changes to Google's privacy policy; whether they violate Australian Privacy Law; and proposals for improving consumer privacy protection in the European Union, the United States and Australia.

He said 97 per cent of respondents believed Australians should be able to take legal action in the case of serious breaches of their privacy.

These results illustrated a high level of public concern for personal information in the digital era and highlighted the importance of revisiting Australian privacy law in light of technological innovations and new information collection practices.

“The issue of personal information is likely to increase in importance as more people spend more of their time using devices and applications which capture ever more detailed information about their lives, their activities, and their communications,” Dr Andrejevic said.

One of the study's most significant findings is that more than 75 per cent

of the respondents said they needed to know more about the ways in which companies collected and used information about them.

More information: The findings are based on a National telephone survey conducted with n=1106 adults across Australia between November 17 and December 14, 2011 by UQ's Social Research Centre. Reported data was proportionally weighted to adjust for design (chance of selection), contact opportunities (mobile only, landline or both) and demographics (gender, age, education and state).

Provided by University of Queensland

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