Unlocking the geoblock with VPNs

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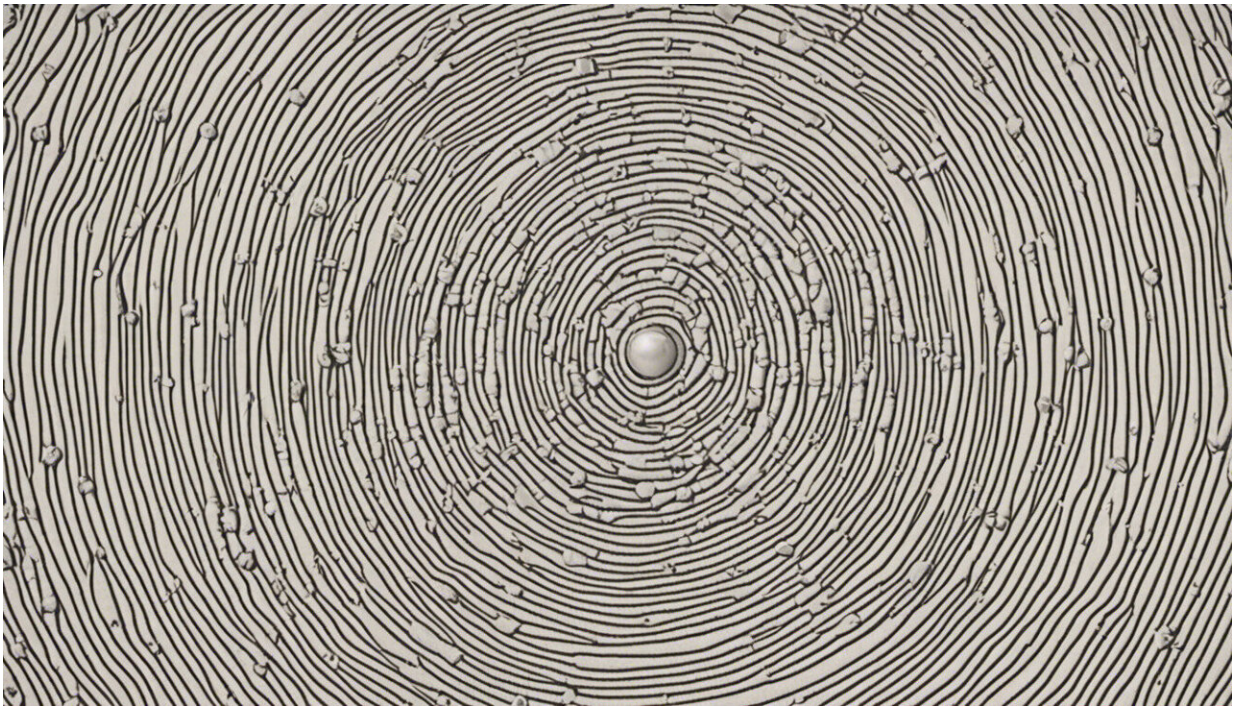

Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

In recent months there have been many reports of Australians covertly signing up for the US streaming service Netflix, using fake postcodes and software workarounds to fool its geo-blocking system.

One industry-commissioned study estimates that up to 200,000 Australians have subscribed to the service in this way.

Geoblocking circumvention is by all accounts a common practice in Australian households – and an industry is emerging to meet the demand for borderless streaming.

Hundreds of start-up companies now offer unblocking and identity-masking services, such as Hide My Ass using a virtual private network (VPN), Get Flix using DNS proxies and easy-to-use browser plugins such as Hola. Detailed how-to guides can be found on popular tech websites and in the mainstream media.

For a monthly fee of A$5-A$10, a VPN will mask your identity online by routing your traffic through its servers (whose IP address is in another country), and thwart geoblocking. Consequently, VPNs are popular with a diverse range of users: privacy advocates, political dissidents, filesharers, tourists, and – now – Netflix users.

How common is VPN use in Australia?

Through the World Internet Project (WIP), we have been looking into this question. The World Internet Project is a bi-annual telephone survey conducted across 35 countries. The Australian arm of the survey is based at Swinburne University, and every two years we phone 1,000 people to ask about various aspects of their internet use.

The last survey included questions about household VPN and web proxy use. The results were rather surprising. Twenty per cent of respondents indicated they use either a VPN or a web proxy, or both, to access the internet and download files at home.

As these figures suggest, there is clearly a high degree of familiarity with privacy software among the Australian population. One in five people know how to use these tools.

This doesn't mean that all these people are accessing offshore streaming sites, of course. VPNs have legitimate business uses with many companies and government agencies running VPNs so that their staff can work securely off-site. Many privacy-conscious people also use VPNs to keep their communications secure. But we can assume some kind of connection between this 20% figure and people's streaming habits.

How VPN operator BTGuard markets its services to consumers. Credit: btguard.com, Author provided

Let's put this finding side by side with the figure of 200,000 unauthorised Australian Netflix subscribers that was recently mooted. In the context of our study, that figure seems very plausible – in fact, we would suggest it is probably on the low side.

An open-ended technology

Tracking the VPN's evolution from an IT networking tool to a domestic entertainment accessory tells us something about how the character of digital technologies can shift as a result of their everyday uses.

Until recently, VPNs were used mostly for business purposes and by tech-savvy geeks. They had little appeal to non-specialists.

Today, VPNs are arguably a household technology rather than an obscure networking technology. The past few years have seen VPN providers enthusiastically market their services to domestic consumers.

Some VPNs specifically target the filesharing community. Others promote their services on the basis of privacy protection, playing on our fears about cybercrime and government surveillance. Others explicitly promote themselves as geoblocking circumvention tools.

It is also worth considering how people are using VPNs in other parts of the world. These practices often have little in common with how Australians use them.

In many nations, VPNs are being used to evade government censorship. Teenagers in Turkey use VPNs to access Twitter and YouTube when they are blocked by the government (a common occurrence). Iranians use VPNs to socialise on Facebook. Chinese netizens use them to evade the prying eyes of the state.

Diasporic communities in Australia and elsewhere also use VPNs to access streaming media from home.

Seen from this perspective, Australians' streaming habits are connected to a complex array of location-masking practices across the world – used variously by price-sensitive consumers, early adopters, filesharers, privacy advocates, tourists, overseas workers and political dissidents. At the centre of all this is the humble VPN.

In coming years, it will be interesting to see how the VPN's social meaning and uses change further as people find as-yet unimagined

applications for privacy software.

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