

Don't want NSA to spy on your email? 5 things you can do

March 16 2015, by Michael Liedtke



In this Feb. 1, 2012 file photo, a student works with a computer and a calculator at Reynoldsburg High School in Reynoldsburg, Ohio. According to a new survey from Pew Research Center released Monday, March 16, 2015, more than half of Americans are worried about the U.S. government's digital spies prying into their emails, texts, search requests and other online information, but few are trying to thwart the surveillance. (AP Photo/Jay LaPrete, File)

More than half of Americans are worried about the U.S. government's digital spies prying into their emails, texts, search requests and other

online information, but few are trying to thwart the surveillance.

That's according to a new survey from Pew Research Center, released Monday. A main reason for the inertia? Pew researchers found that a majority of those surveyed don't know about online shields that could help boost privacy or believe it would be too difficult to avoid the government's espionage.

The poll questioned 475 adults from Nov. 26 to Jan. 3—about a year-and-a-half after confidential documents leaked by former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden revealed the U.S. government has been monitoring a broad range of online communications for years as part of its efforts to diffuse terrorist threats.

"It all boils down to people sort of feeling like they have lost control over their data and their personal information," Mary Madden, a senior researcher for Pew, told The Associated Press. "But at the same time, when we asked them if they would like to do more, folks expressed that as an aspirational goal."

Here are five steps you can take to be more private online.

STEALTHY SEARCHING

Don't want a digital dossier of your personal interests to be stored and analyzed? Wean yourself from the most popular search engines—Google, Bing and Yahoo. All of them collect and dissect your queries to learn what kinds of products and services might appeal to you so they can sell advertising targeted to your interests. Just because that trove of data is meant to be used for commercial purposes doesn't mean snoopers such as the NSA couldn't vacuum up the information, too, to

find out more about you. A small search engine called DuckDuckGo has been gaining more fans with its pledge to never collect personal information or track people entering queries on its site.

Just 10 percent of those participating in Pew's survey said they use a search engine that doesn't track their searching history.

SCRAMBLE YOUR EMAIL

Encryption programs such as Pretty Good Privacy, or PGP, can make your email appear indecipherable to anyone without the digital key to translate the gibberish. This can help prevent highly sensitive financial and business information from getting swept up by hackers, as well as a government dragnet. Yet only 2 percent of the people surveyed by Pew used PGP or other email encryption programs. Part of the problem: Encryption isn't easy to use, as email recipients also need to use encryption or leave their regular inboxes to read messages.

CLOAK YOUR BROWSER

A privacy tool called Blur, made by Abine, enables its users to surf the Web without their activities being tracked. It also masks passwords and credit card information entered on computers and mobile devices so they can't be lifted from the databases of the websites that collect them. Blur charges \$39 annually for this level of protection. Privacy Badger from the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a digital rights group, offers a free way to block tracking of browsing activity.

Only 5 percent of the Pew respondents used these kinds of tools.

CUT OUT THE INTERNET

It might sound old-school, but if you want to share something really sensitive, meet face to face. The Pew poll found 14 percent of respondents are choosing to speak in person more frequently rather than text, email or talk on the phone because of the Snowden revelations.

GET SMARTER

If you're looking to become more literate about the ins and outs of digital privacy, two of the most comprehensive guides can be found through the Electronic Frontier Foundation's Surveillance Self-Defense site, ssd.eff.org/en , and prism-break.org/en/ .

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