

Struggling with privacy tradeoffs in digital era

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Credit: George Hodan/Public Domain

Would you allow your insurance company to monitor your driving for a discount? Or let a "smart thermostat" save energy by tracking your family's movements around your home?

These are among the constant stream of privacy tradeoffs Americans face in a digital era where their activities, shopping and other [personal](#)

[data](#) can be tracked easily.

A Pew Research Center [survey](#) released Thursday found no consistent pattern on decisions to give up privacy in return for discounts, rewards or other benefits:

- A majority (52 percent) of those surveyed said they would allow their [medical data](#) to be uploaded to a secure site in order to allow their doctor to keep track of their health.
- But only 27 percent said it was acceptable for a thermostat sensor to monitor movements in the home to potentially save on energy costs.
- 47 percent said it was OK for retailers to keep track of shopping habits to offer discounts, while 32 percent said it was not acceptable.

"Many policy makers and companies are anxious to know where Americans draw the line on privacy—when they will resist privacy intrusions and when they are comfortable with sharing personal data," said Pew researcher Lee Rainie.

"These findings show how people's decisions are often context-specific and contingent. A phrase that summarizes their attitudes is, 'It depends.' Most are likely to consider options on a case-by-case basis, rather than apply hard-and-fast [privacy](#) rules," Rainie added.

The survey found a majority (54 to 24 percent) said it would be acceptable for employers to install monitoring cameras following a series of workplace thefts.

But many seemed worried about how much information is being shared by social media.

Asked about a scenario in which a free social media platform allows people to connect with friends in exchange for sharing data to deliver advertisements, just one in three said this was acceptable, and 51 percent disagreed.

Some comments received in the survey offered insights into Americans' [privacy concerns](#).

Many fear their personal information is vulnerable, despite pledges to keep it secure.

"The 'secure' sites are continually making the news when they are hacked," one respondent said.

Smartphone location data is especially sensitive: One survey participant said, "I continually deny location services on my phone because I don't want the chance of ads coming up."

And several said marketing based on personal data or tracking was disturbing.

"I look at one thing online and then see it on every single site for weeks. At first—intriguing. Then creepy," one participant said.

The report was based on a survey of 461 adults in January and February 2015, and augmented with discussions with nine focus groups. The margin of error was estimated at 5.8 percentage points.

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