Internet Privacy

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According to the Online Policy Group (Hunter, 2000), it seems there’s always someone trying to hack into our private lives every day. Recent news reports have also pointed out that there are increasing concerns about the amount of private data energy firms will have access to following the roll-out of smart meters. (Wait, 2010) Entergy Companies are installing smart meters to measure energy use and for billing purposes, most all homes will be outfitted by 2020. The energy companies host meter will communicate with the customer and the supplier. What does all this have to do with privacy? The smart meter can reveal when you are away from home, asleep or cooking, using an air conditioner, stove or taking a shower. Someone else has the ability to be in control of how much hot water can be, how cool your house can be, how long you use lights because they have the power through the smart meter to control your way of life. It isn’t just Google or bank accounts or ordering over the internet or social networks or internet service providers that can reveal things about you and invade your privacy and way of life.

So what is privacy and what is the greatest threat to privacy? First let’s try to define privacy because it is really difficult to define – one person’s opinion on privacy may differ from another. According to Privacy International (2007) it generally:

Is a fundamental human right, it underpins human dignity and other values such as freedom of association and freedom of speech. It is the individual's right to be left alone or the desire by each of us for physical space where we can be free of interruption, intrusion, embarrassment, or accountability and the attempt to control the time and manner of disclosures of personal information about ourselves.

Thus, Internet privacy is one of the concerns of today’s wired/wireless environment. Taking the definition of Privacy International (2007), the primary issue really pertaining to Internet privacy is the disclosures of personal information especially to unscrupulous individuals and organizations.

What can be done to protect your privacy?

1.) Be vigilant about your bank account. If you bank on-line or pay bills, check in often to spot-check your account.

2.) Protect your computer with a good anti-virus package and turn on your firewall. This provides protection that you control. You may not be able to control how other people handle your information but you can take responsibility for your own computer.

3.) Open a separate disposable or alias email account when signing up for a service. Never allow your main account to become bombarded with spam.

4.) Keep your personal information personal. Never send out personal details in an email. Secure sites must start with https:// and information over these sites is encrypted.

5.) Be careful when social networking. Nothing can be more revealing than MySpace, Twitter and/or Facebook. Never advertise vacation times and dates, children’s soccer game times, and/or include your mailing address and telephone number. Remember also that employers regularly look at employee’s sites. Nothing you do in any of these sites is “private”.

There is much that can be written about privacy but how does all of this relate to students? It’s very simple: they must learn that everything they say and/or do has consequences. What they say and when they say it can follow them for a very long time. Teaching them early on about privacy will make them better students, citizens and, hopefully, keep them secure from predators.

Internet privacy is truly a major concern that individuals, organizations and the government should do everything possible to protect in this world of technology. Without it we’re likely to end up like the characters in Aldous Huxley’s 1932 novel Brave New World – they may live in Utopia but the price was the surrender of their free will and privacy.

References

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