My friend and colleague Jon David often comments on my columns, and his recent remarks prompted me to ask him to elaborate on his thoughts about privacy. This column and the next are mildly edited versions of his writing with some additional URLs and references for further reading.

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The emergence of the Internet in general, and the Worldwide Web in particular, as leading avenues for conducting business has brought with it new targets for information thieves. Data bases of inquiries and actual purchases are natural marketing resources, and credit card information can be readily misused. Because things like credit card lists can be easily associated with dollar damages, protective actions regarding them have attracted the lion's share of the interest thus far shown. This makes some sense, since things like making on-line purchases with credit cards would be very unattractive if users weren't told their transactions and information were secure. Other information -- things like names, addresses, telephone numbers, and the like -- are harder to quantify in dollar amounts, and therefore receive less attention.

Personal privacy has been an interest of many users since well before the popularization of the worldwide web. Going as far back as 25 years ago, when general electronic information interchange was accomplished via postings to bulletin boards and by individual correspondence via MCI Mail, CompuServe and the like, we find that services such as anonymizers -- which kept the names and e-mail addresses of the actual message senders a secret -- were often used. The reasons anonymizers were popular included not receiving unwanted responses, not making one's e-mail address public, and not being associated with a particular subject (sometimes inconvenient for either an individual or his/her employer). With the current prevalence of unsolicited commercial e-mail (“spam”), personal privacy has become increasingly important. There are now many gateway, server and individual spam-prevention products.

The industry is well aware of the need for privacy of user information. The most recent manifestation of this awareness is the Platform for Privacy Preferences Project (P3P) which has been developed by the World Wide Web Consortium. P3P gives users more control over the amount of information they disclose about themselves as they browse the Web. Further, and much more importantly, the privacy of personal information has become a specific legal issue.

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In the next article, Jon David looks at specific recent legislation governing privacy in the USA.

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Further reading on the Web:

ACLU privacy resources <http://aclu.org/issues/privacy/hmprivacy.html>
E-mail Privacy FAQ <http://www.andrebacard.com/email.html>
Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC) <http://www.epic.org/>
P3P Platform for Privacy Preferences <http://www.w3.org/P3P/>
Privacy Rights <http://www.privacyrights.org>
Privacy.org <http://www.privacy.org/>

See also


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