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Brookings survey finds three-quarters of online users rarely read business terms of service

Darrell M. West Tuesday, May 21, 2019

As more human activities move online, companies are accumulating extensive information about consumers. The sheer amount of data involved raises important questions regarding personal privacy. People worry that companies have too much confidential information, the material is at risk of being compromised, and data will be publicized or used against them in some manner. Figuring out how to deal with these issues represents a major challenge for consumers, businesses, and government officials.

To examine attitudes toward consumer privacy, researchers at the Brookings Institution undertook an online U.S. national poll with 2,006 adult internet users between May 8 to 10, 2019. The survey was overseen by Darrell M. West, vice president of Governance Studies and director of the Center for Technology Innovation at the Brookings Institution and the author of The Future of Work: Robots, AI, and Automation. Responses were weighted using gender, age, and region to match the demographics of the national internet population as estimated by the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey.

Consumers Rarely Read Terms of Service

One of the primary approaches to privacy protection involves “notice and consent” requirements. When consumers want to purchase an app or utilize an online service, they are shown detailed terms of service and must consent to the

stated data sharing and legal liability provisions. When asked how often they read these terms before providing consent, 32 percent say they never read the terms, 39 percent read them sometimes, 20 percent claim they read the terms most of the time, and 9 percent are unsure. The large number of non- or partial-readers (nearly three-quarters of the population) shows the ineffectiveness of notice and consent requirements. There cannot be informed consent when people do not know the terms to which they are agreeing.

Who Should Protect Online Data?

We also asked who should be responsible for protecting online data. Thirty-six percent say the national government, 20 percent cite businesses, 16 percent claim consumers, 6 percent identify state governments, and 22 percent don't know or have no opinion

One Set of Government Rules

Sixty-seven percent indicate they would like one consistent set of government rules on the handling of online consumer data, 14 percent do not, and 19 percent don't know or have no opinion.

Do-Not-Track Registry

Seventy-eight percent believe the U.S. Federal Trade Commission should establish a national "do-not-track" registry that allows consumers to opt out of sharing their personal data, 7 percent do not, and 15 percent do not or have no opinion.

Importance of Online Privacy

When asked how important online privacy is to them, 80 percent say it is important, 12 percent think it is unimportant, and 8 percent don't know or have no opinion.

Prior Consumer Approval

Eighty-five percent believe companies should be required to get a consumer's approval on the use of personal data before the data are collected, 6 percent do not, and 9 percent don't know or have no opinion. And when asked about the use of geographic location data from mobile devices, 84 percent think companies should be required to get a consumer's approval, 5 percent do not, and 11 percent don't know or have no opinion.

Selling Consumer Information

Seventy-three percent think companies should not be allowed to sell consumer information to other firms that are not bound by the privacy rules of the original company, 19 percent believe they should, and 8 percent don't know or have no opinion.

Confidence in Data Usage

Only 8 percent are very confident they know what data are being collected when they use connected devices, 25 percent are somewhat confident, 58 percent are not confident at all, and 9 percent don't know or have no opinion. When asked how confident they were about how data was being used or shared by companies, 7 percent are very confident, 19 percent are somewhat confident, 64 percent are not confident at all, and 10 percent don't know or have no opinion.

1. How important is online privacy to you?

- 9% very unimportant
- 3% somewhat unimportant
- 14% somewhat important
- 66% very important
- 8% don't know or no answer

2. When you sign up for online services, companies ask you to read and accept their terms of service. How much of the time do you read these terms of service?

- 32% never
- 39% sometimes
- 20% most of the time
- 9% don't know or no answer

3. Would you like one consistent set of government rules on the handling of online consumer data?

- 10% definitely no
- 4% possibly no
- 19% possibly yes
- 48% definitely yes
- 19% don't know or no answer

4. Should companies be required to get a consumer's approval on the use of their personal data before the data are collected?

- 4% definitely no
- 2% possibly no
- 12% possibly yes

- 73% definitely yes
- 9% don't know or no answer

5. Should companies be required to get a consumer's approval on the use of their geographic location from mobile devices before the data are collected?

- 3% definitely no
- 2% possibly no
- 13 possibly yes
- 71% definitely yes
- 11% don't know or no answer

6. Should companies be allowed to sell consumer information to other firms that are not bound by the privacy rules of the original company?

- 66% definitely no
- 7% possibly no
- 5% possibly yes
- 14% definitely yes
- 8% don't know or no answer

7. Should the U.S. Federal Trade Commission establish a national "do-not-track" registry that allows consumers to opt out of sharing their personal data?

- 5% definitely no
- 2% somewhat no
- 12% somewhat yes
- 66% definitely yes
- 15% don't know or no answer

8. How confident do you feel that you know what data is being collected when you use connected devices?

- 58% not confident at all
- 25% somewhat confident
- 8% very confident
- 9% don't know or no answer

9. How confident do you feel that you know how data is being used or shared by companies you provide information to?

- 64% not confident at all
- 19% somewhat confident
- 7% very confident
- 10% don't know or no answer

10. Who do you think should be most responsible for protecting consumer privacy?

- 20% businesses
- 36% national government
- 6% state governments
- 16% consumers
- 22% don't know or no answer

Gender:

- 52.7% male, 47.3% female in sample
- 48.1% male, 51.9% female in target population

Age:

- 6.0% 18-24, 14.6% 25-34, 17.0% 35-44, 20.7% 45-54, 23.4% 55-64, 18.3% 65+ in sample
- 12.6% 18-24, 19.4% 25-34, 17.5% 35-44, 17.6% 45-54, 16.7% 55-64, 16.2% 65+ in target population

Region:

- 16.5% Northeast, 26.0% Midwest, 36.1% South, 21.4% West in sample
- 17.3% Northeast, 21.3% Midwest, 37.5% South, 23.9% West in target population

Survey Methodology

This online survey polled 2,006 adult internet users in the United States May 8 to 10, 2019 through the [Google Surveys](#) platform. Responses were weighted using gender, age, and region to match the demographics of the national internet population as estimated by the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey.

In the 2012 presidential election, Google Surveys was the [second most accurate poll](#) of national surveys as judged by polling expert Nate Silver. In addition, the Pew Research Center undertook a [detailed assessment of Google Surveys](#) and found them generally to be representative of the demographic profile of national internet users. In comparing Google Survey results to its own telephone polls on 43 different substantive issues, Pew researchers found a median difference of about three percentage points between Google online surveys and Pew telephone polls. [A 2016 analysis](#) of Google Surveys published in the peer-reviewed methodology journal *Political Analysis* by political scientists at Rice University replicated a number of research results and concluded "GCS [Google Consumer Surveys] is likely to be a useful platform for survey experimentalists." Google's [2019 analysis](#) of its surveys found similar results to Pew Research Center polls.

This research was made possible by [Google Surveys](#), which donated use of its online survey platform. The questions and findings are solely those of the researchers and not influenced by any donation. For more detailed information on the methodology, see the [Google Surveys Whitepaper](#).