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REPORT | SEPTEMBER 5, 2013

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Anonymity, Privacy, and Security Online

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Anonymity online

Most internet users would like to be anonymous online at least occasionally, but many think it is not possible to be completely anonymous online. New findings in a national survey show:

- 86% of internet users have taken steps online to remove or mask their digital footprints—ranging from clearing cookies to encrypting their email, from avoiding using their name to using virtual networks that mask their internet protocol (IP) address.
- 55% of internet users have taken steps to avoid observation by specific people, organizations, or the government

Still, 59% of internet users do not believe it is possible to be completely anonymous online, while 37% of them believe it is possible.

A section of the survey looking at various security-related issues finds that notable numbers of internet users say they have experienced problems because others stole their personal information or otherwise took advantage of their visibility online—including hijacked email and social media accounts, stolen information such as Social Security numbers or credit card information, stalking or harassment, loss of reputation, or victimization by scammers.

- 21% of internet users have had an email or social networking account compromised or taken over by someone else without permission.
- 13% of internet users have experienced trouble in a relationship between them and a family member or a friend because of something the user posted online.
- 12% of internet users have been stalked or harassed online.
- 11% of internet users have had important personal information stolen such as their Social Security Number, credit card, or bank account information.
- 6% of internet users have been the victim of an online scam and lost money.
- 6% of internet users have had their reputation damaged because of something that happened online.

- 4% of internet users have been led into physical danger because of something that happened online.
- 1% of internet users have lost a job opportunity or educational opportunity because of something they posted online or someone posted about them.

Some 68% of internet users believe current laws are not good enough in protecting people's privacy online and 24% believe current laws provide reasonable protections.

Most internet users know that key pieces of personal information about them are available online—such as photos and videos of them, their email addresses, birth dates, phone numbers, home addresses, and the groups to which they belong. And growing numbers of internet users (50%) say they are worried about the amount of personal information about them that is online—a figure that has jumped from 33% who expressed such worry in 2009.

People would like control over their information, saying in many cases it is very important to them that only they or the people they authorize should be given access to such things as the content of their emails, the people to whom they are sending emails, the place where they are when they are online, and the content of the files they download.

About this survey

This survey by the Pew Research Center's Internet Project was underwritten by Carnegie Mellon University. The findings in this report are based on data from telephone interviews conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International from July 11-14, among a sample of 1,002 adults ages 18 and older. Telephone interviews were conducted in English by landline and cell phone. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling is plus or minus 3.4 percentage points and for the results from 792 internet and smartphone users in the sample, the margin of error is 3.8 percentage points. More information is available in the Methods section at the end of this report.
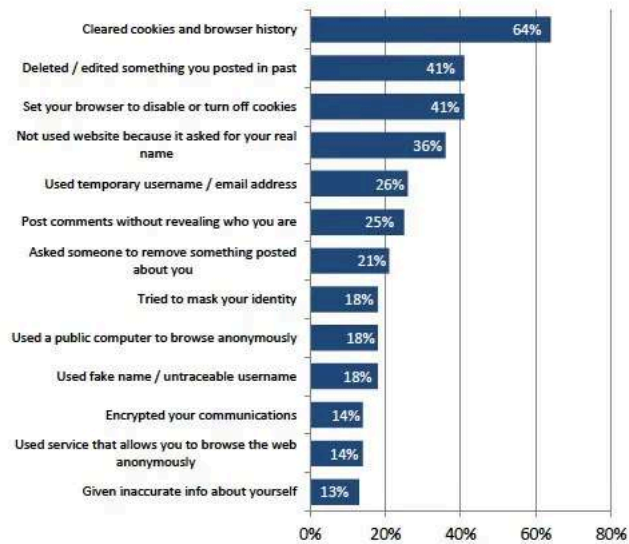
A closer look at key findings

86% of internet users have tried to use the internet in ways to minimize the visibility of their digital footprints

The chart below shows the variety of ways that internet users have tried to avoid being observed online.

The strategies people use to be less visible online
% of adult internet users who say they have done these things online

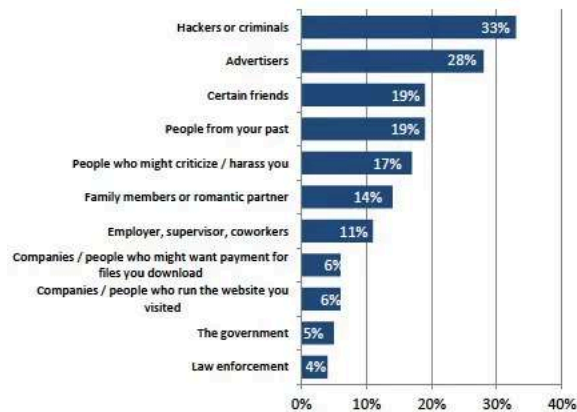| Strategy	Percentage
Cleared cookies and browser history	64%
Deleted / edited something you posted in past	41%
Set your browser to disable or turn off cookies	41%
Not used website because it asked for your real name	36%
Used temporary username / email address	26%
Post comments without revealing who you are	25%
Asked someone to remove something posted about you	21%
Tried to mask your identity	18%
Used a public computer to browse anonymously	18%
Used fake name / untraceable username	18%
Encrypted your communications	14%
Used service that allows you to browse the web anonymously	14%
Given inaccurate info about yourself	13%

Source: Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project Omnibus Survey, conducted July 11-14, 2013, on landline and cell phones. N=792 for internet users and smartphone owners. Interviews were conducted in English on landline and cell phones. The margin of error on the sample is +/- 3.8 percentage points.

55% of internet users have taken steps to hide from specific people or organizations

Beyond their general hope that they can go online anonymously, the majority of internet users have tried to avoid observation by other people, groups, companies, and government agencies. Hackers, criminals and advertisers are at the top of the list of groups people wish to avoid.

Who users try to avoid
% of adult internet users who say they have used the internet in ways to avoid being observed or seen by ...

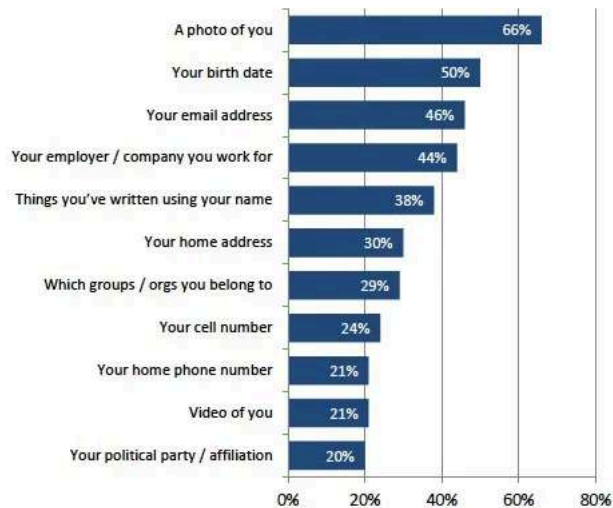| Group	Percentage
Hackers or criminals	33%
Advertisers	28%
Certain friends	19%
People from your past	19%
People who might criticize / harass you	17%
Family members or romantic partner	14%
Employer, supervisor, coworkers	11%
Companies / people who might want payment for files you download	6%
Companies / people who run the website you visited	6%
The government	5%
Law enforcement	4%

Source: Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project Omnibus Survey, conducted July 11-14, 2013, on landline and cell phones. N=792 for internet users and smartphone owners. Interviews were conducted in English on landline and cell phones. The margin of error on the sample is +/- 3.8 percentage points.

Users report that a wide range of their personal information is available online, but feel strongly about controlling who has access to certain kinds of behavioral data and communications content.

Users know that there is a considerable amount of personal information about them available online. Among the list of items queried, photos were the most commonly reported content posted online; 66% of internet users reported that an image of them was available online. And half (50%) say that their birth date is available.

Personal information online
% of adult internet users who say this information about them is available online

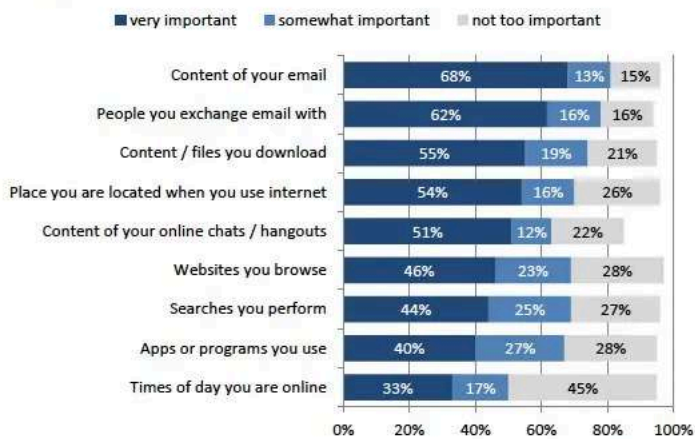| Information	Percentage
A photo of you	66%
Your birth date	50%
Your email address	46%
Your employer / company you work for	44%
Things you've written using your name	38%
Your home address	30%
Which groups / orgs you belong to	29%
Your cell number	24%
Your home phone number	21%
Video of you	21%
Your political party / affiliation	20%

Source: Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project Omnibus Survey, conducted July 11-14, 2013, on landline and cell phones. N=792 for internet users and smartphone owners. Interviews were conducted in English on landline and cell phones. The margin of error on the sample is +/- 3.8 percentage points.

Another set of questions focused on the kinds of "data exhaust" that is generated as a result of everyday forms of online communications, web surfing and application use. Respondents were asked how much they cared "that only you and those you authorize should have access" to certain kinds of behavioral data and communications content and there was notable variance in the answers. The content of email messages and the people with whom one communicates via email are considerably more sensitive pieces of information when compared with other online activities and associated data trails.

How much do you care that only you and those you authorize should have access to this information?
% of adult internet users who say it is important—or not—to them to control these types of information

Legend: very important — somewhat important — not too important

Information	very important	somewhat important	not too important
Content of your email	68%	13%	15%
People you exchange email with	62%	16%	16%
Content / files you download	55%	19%	21%
Place you are located when you use internet	54%	16%	26%
Content of your online chats / hangouts	51%	12%	22%
Websites you browse	46%	23%	28%
Searches you perform	44%	25%	27%
Apps or programs you use	40%	27%	28%
Times of day you are online	33%	17%	45%

Source: Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project Omnibus Survey, conducted July 11-14, 2013, on landline and cell phones. N=792 for internet users and smartphone owners. Interviews were conducted in English on landline and cell phones. The margin of error on the sample is +/- 3.8 percentage points.

Next: Part 1: The Quest for Anonymity Online

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