

Policy Research Alert

FROM FLASH-IT, A DISSEMINATION PROJECT RELATING EUROPEAN POLICY PRIORITIES TO EU-FUNDED RESEARCH IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

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Personal Privacy: Are European Internet Users Giving Up Their Fundamental Rights?

Three-year investigation reveals high perception of risk and lack of mechanisms for reporting infringement

An EU-funded research project has drawn attention to questionable practices of online services that exploit personal data associated with user-generated content. The findings show that Europeans who utilize such services (Facebook and YouTube, for instance) have ‘very strong expectations’ that their personal information will be used and shared without their knowledge or consent.

Based on survey and interview data collected in 26 countries, the CONSENT¹ consortium found ‘rather high’ levels of perceived risk associated with disclosing personal information online. Yet users are routinely asked by social networking services (SNSs) to provide such information. Analysing policies of over a hundred SNSs operating in Europe, the researchers found that over half require users to reveal their gender and birthdate upon registration. 46% insist on users providing their full name, and around 8% ask for sensitive information such as sexual orientation.

The researchers also looked closely at how online services process personal data for commercial purposes. Of the 107 SNSs analysed, 46 regard consent for commercial exploitation to be implied in their Terms of Use Agreement. Only 38 require users to give consent explicitly before commercial processing of their personal data is permitted. In some cases (17) SNSs do not allow users to withdraw their consent at a later date.

While the consortium notes significant variation in the way users approach online privacy issues in EU countries, it is clear that most people who use social networking services in Europe do not spend much time informing themselves about privacy policies. Only 24% of users bother to read SNS privacy policy statements at all. And those who do tend to feel short-changed: only 11% of users who have taken the time to read an SNS policy claim to have fully understood it.

¹ Consumer sentiment regarding privacy on user generated content services in the digital economy (CONSENT). For more information about the project and its findings – including detailed statistical data – please visit CONSENT’s website at www.consent.law.muni.cz