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Internet and Privacy

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Internet and Privacy

1.0 Introduction

Privacy is not a new concept. It existed before the era of the current telecommunications networks and technologies (Tavani, 1999). Privacy is a natural action or reaction of individuals as one of their rights in public (Lin and Loui, 1998). For example, sealing an envelope or closing the door reminds us of privacy (Stefik, 1999). The evolving and rapid advancement of new technologies such as the telecommunication networks and in particular, the Internet, especially, after Berners-Lee presented a project in 1991 to permit links to be created to any information anywhere, are known today as the “WorldWideWeb (WWW)” (Rhyno, 2003). The use of the Internet has increased rapidly. The Internet is now considered a part of our daily lives (Paine et al., 2006b). The privacy concerns of Internet users have increased and the signs of these concerns started to appear from the middle of the 1990s after the commercial development of the WWW browser in 1994 (Kruck et al., 2002). This essay is going to present the meaning of privacy and the implications of it for Internet users. Also, this essay will demonstrate some of the issues that are presented in the literature, as well as exploring different authors’ perspectives on Internet and Privacy concerns.

2.0 What is Privacy

There are lots of authors who have attempted to define privacy in the literature, and theories covering several privacy issues have presented privacy as non- intrusion, the control of information, and restricted access, along with other issues. However, the concept of privacy is hard to understand and is not easy to define (Tavani, 1999), because this concept is linked with several dimensions such as the personal body, personal behaviour and currently, personal communications and personal information (Clarke, 1999). These dimensions are governed by certain laws and policies which form the dimensions based in these laws and policy legislations.

The literature presents several definitions for the meaning of privacy. For instance, some of these definitions were based on definitions that had been presented a long time ago by Warren and Brandeis in 1890, and included the right for the individual to be left alone (Lin and Loui, 1998; Shalhoub, 2006). Other authors such as (Westin, 1967 and Altman's 1975) have argued that privacy is only connected with the right to prevent self-disclosure to others (Paine et al., 2006b). In the literature there was no clear example of a privacy definition and this is for several reasons, most of which return to the lack of comprehensive laws which prevent legislation connected with privacy issues (Kruck et al., 2002).

3.0 Internet and Privacy

After exploring some of the above privacy definitions, this section will present the meaning of the expression, Internet privacy. Tavani (1999) pointed out that some scholars confine the expression, Internet privacy, to the issues that are connected to privacy concerns which are connected with user activities during the use of the Internet.

Although there are several aspects of privacy, privacy issues associated with the use of the Internet are most likely appointed under communications privacy, involving the user of the Internet's personal information and activities, and the disclosure of them online (Paine et al., 2006a).

It is worth noting that the activities using the Internet are not only associated with entering personal information by the Internet user online, such as in purchasing online or in applying for a job, or for some other purpose, but also in surfing the Web, for instance, using a search engine like Google or visiting any Web site that sheds any visitor with what are commonly known as cookies, which silently collect information about the visitor (Lin and Loui, 1998; Tavani, 1998). This is considered to be releasing personal information and these personal transactions have caused a rise in privacy concerns among Internet users.

Although privacy concerns are not a new issue, and have been around since the beginning of intensive use of the internet during the middle of 1990s, after entering the millennium, which was about six years from the commercial development of the Internet browser, the public have started to realize the importance of their personal information (Kruck et al., 2002) and its destiny. Perhaps what took all that time for the public to realize the significance of Internet privacy, is that the majority of the Internet users do not care about their privacy, as has been found in a study conducted in January 2006 (Paine et al., 2006a).

These concerns left the Internet users to take their own precautions in providing any personal information, thus pushing Internet users to change their identity by using pseudonyms or “Nick names”, and by implementing software or programs such as Firewall and Antivirus (Paine et al., 2006a).

There are a number of recent studies and surveys about Internet users and their concerns related to the Internet and privacy. A recent survey conducted by (Zukowski and Brown, 2007) concerning the relationship between the concern for Internet privacy and user education found that “Internet users with higher levels of education are less concerned about information privacy”(2007:202). It is perhaps significant that this study achieved this finding; however, the authors of this study focus mainly on specific aspects connected with the manner of the Internet use based on Gender, Income, Education levels and Internet experience and did not cover Internet user activities online, which leaves a gap in understanding these relationships that have been found in the survey.

According to a study conducted by a group of Belgian experts about law and information technology in 2003, the indications were that due to the continuous growth of the use of the Internet, privacy issues and concerns had increased and many Internet users were concerned about their personal information and their privacy (Claessens et al., 2003). This study focused on technical and legal points of view and did not demonstrate the social aspects. Also, the study did not have a methodological structure and there was no specific sample to allow a clear image of the study findings.

4.0 Conclusion

The privacy situation is getting huge and the concerns for the privacy of Internet users have started to increase lately, in a time when there is still no clear legislation in relation to personal privacy online. Despite there bring different views on privacy and the meaning of it, there is an urgent need to clarify and ensure the privacy rights of the Internet user. Now is the right time to unite in the collection of views about the Internet and privacy and to come up with clear legislations to ensure this right for the Internet users.

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