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## In Whom Do We Trust?

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*by Lynie Arden*

We are all concerned (92 percent of us, anyway) about our privacy being violated on the Internet. When it comes to our personal information, there's plenty to worry about. Yet while most people express concern, they still cheerfully trade away bits and pieces of their data for a chance to win a trip to Vegas or some baubles and beads. That's fine if that's your choice. But what if it's not? No one in Iceland was given any choice last year when the government sold out the entire population's genetic history. Every citizen's health, genetic, and genealogical record ended up in the hands of Swiss pharmaceutical giant Hoffman-LaRoche. No one was asked for consent, and no one can ask to be removed from the database.

You may be thinking that everyone knows you can't trust the government. But whom can you trust? That's what the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC) set out to learn from its 1999 survey of the 100 most popular shopping Web sites. They found 18 percent had no privacy policy posted, and the privacy policies that did exist were "confusing, incomplete, and inconsistent." Although none of the sites required personal information to browse, all of them collected personal identities and contact information for conducting transactions. EPIC concluded that less than 10 percent of Web sites offer minimal privacy protection and the current self-regulation is leaving online users scared and vulnerable.

### Examples of Trust Abuse

Consumers are naturally leery of dealing with small, unknown e-tailers, but does bigger necessarily mean safer? On the Net, the biggest gorilla on the block is Amazon.com. In February 2000, Amazon.com was investigated for privacy violations while its software unit, Alexa, simultaneously fought off two lawsuits involving the alleged interception, collection, and transmission of personal data. According to one of the complaints, confidential information was being gathered from consumers without their knowledge or consent and secretly passed on to Amazon.com.

Online consumers frequently put more trust in companies with household names and massive brick and mortar chains, but having an offline presence is no guarantee of protection either. The giant giraffe abused our trust and consequently 11 class action lawsuits were filed against Toys R Us in August 2000. Online shoppers accused the leading toy retailer of violating its own privacy policy by intercepting and disclosing personal data to a third-party marketing company, CoreMetrics. Again, this was done without the knowledge

or consent of the users.

## Signed, Sealed, Protected?

Self-regulation proponents recommend that online consumers look for a privacy seal from provider organizations such as the nonprofit privacy initiative, TRUSTe. But what does that seal really mean? Companies qualify for a TRUSTe seal by posting privacy policies, allowing TRUSTe to monitor their operations to make sure they are adhering to their privacy policies, and paying a licensing fee of \$299 - \$4,999.

Recently, TRUSTe's credibility has been seriously questioned. TRUSTe licensees have been accused of various privacy violations and the organization seems powerless, or unwilling, to do anything meaningful to protect consumers. One licensee, Real Networks, admitted to violating the privacy of 13 million users of RealJukebox, a product that surreptitiously tracked users' listening habits, sending daily reports of that data to the parent company.

Several other Web giants -- all TRUSTe licensees -- got in hot water with the FTC over the mishandling of online privacy. Microsoft Corp.'s Hotmail service had a security hole even a child could see: with just a login name, anyone could access another user's e-mail account. The hole has since been patched, but who knows what damage was done? For over a year, Deja News secretly tracked who was e-mailing whom while depositing all the users' IP addresses in their database. Then there was the case of GeoCities, which settled with the FTC after being cited for improperly collecting data from children under 13.

TRUSTe has investigated hundreds of privacy violations, yet the organization has yet to revoke a single licensing agreement. When consumers see the bright green TRUSTe logo on a Web site, they assume that the business is trustworthy. What they don't expect is that these "certified" companies may still be collecting information from them without their knowledge or consent.

Membership in a self-regulation program such as TRUSTe or the Better Business Bureau Online does not guarantee privacy protection for consumers, but it is at least an indication of a company's willingness to address the issue and provide a privacy policy for its visitors.

## Looking for a Little Privacy

Considering the importance of privacy and the growing concern among Internet users over the issue, it's surprising how few Web sites actually have privacy policies and of those that do, how few post them in plain sight. It's generally a good sign when you can actually find the privacy policy prominently noted on the home page. Once you find a privacy policy, though, you have to determine if it's a good one. Although there is no "standard" policy, good ones explain:

- What personal information is being collected and why.
- How the information will be used and by whom.
- Your rights as a user to view, change, or delete your information.
- Whether the information will be shared with third parties and what steps will be taken to control unwarranted disclosure.

### PRIVACY OPTIONS

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Type of Content:

Topic Area:

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These explanations are just a start. The best privacy policies also provide full contact information for all parties that will have access to your information, include examples of information being collected, and offer clear instructions for opting out. Information regarding how your data will be used, particularly when shared with third parties, should be detailed, not vague or contradictory. Ideally, the privacy policy will be accessible from every page on the site, but in addition to the home page, it definitely should be easily accessible from any additional pages where personal information is actually being collected.

## Trust Yourself

Although the presence of a privacy policy does not always ensure privacy protection, it's a good start. The protection of your privacy, however, is ultimately in your hands. The more consumers question companies about their privacy policies, the more the companies will take notice. On the World Wide Web, you must assume you are not anonymous. Every inquiry you make about a product and every ad you view feeds vast databases with that much more information. It is all too quickly incorporated into a detailed profile about you, a profile that you may never see. Guard your information carefully, assume the worst, and investigate carefully before you start shopping on a new site. And remember these words from EPIC: "Surfer Beware."

## Related Information

### [Privacy Fears Online](#)

Since the beginning of the Internet, users have been concerned about privacy issues, and those concerns are growing more severe. It seems the general public shares Web surfers' concerns. Recently, The National Consumers League (NCL) discovered through a survey that what worries American consumers most is not health care, crime, or taxes. It's loss of privacy.

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