

YOU AND YOUR DATA

As the internet and digital technology become a bigger part of our lives, more of our data becomes publicly accessible, leading to questions about privacy. So, how do we interact with the growing digital world without compromising the security of our information and our right to privacy?



Imagine that you want to learn a new language. You search 'Is German a difficult language?' on your phone. You click on a link and read an article with advice for learning German. There's a search function to find German courses, so you enter your city name. It asks you to activate location services to find courses near you. You click 'accept'. You then message a German friend to ask for

her advice. When you look her up on social media, an advertisement for a book and an app called German for Beginners instantly pops up. Later the same day, while you're sending an email, you see an advert offering you a discount at a local language school. How did they know? The simple answer is online data. At all stages of your search, your devices, websites and applications were collecting data on your preferences and tracking your behaviour online. 'They' have been following you.

Who uses our data and why?

In the past, it was easy for people to keep track of their personal information. Like their possessions, people's information existed mostly in physical form: on paper, kept in a folder, locked in a cupboard or an office. Today, our personal information can be collected and stored online, and it's accessible to more people than ever before. Many of us share our physical location, our travel plans, our political opinions, our shopping interests and our family photos online – as key services like ordering a takeaway meal, booking a plane, taking part in a poll or buying new clothes now take place online and require us to give out our data.

Every search you make, service you use, message you send and item you buy is part of your 'digital footprint'. Companies and online platforms use this 'footprint' to track exactly what we are doing; from what links we click on to how much time we spend on a website. Based on your online activity, they can guess what you are interested in and what things you might want to buy. Knowing so much about you gives online platforms and companies a lot of power and a lot of money. By selling your data or providing targeted content, companies can turn your online activity into profit. This is the foundation of the growing industry of digital marketing.

Can you protect your data?

Yes ... and no!

Some of the time our personal data is shared online with our consent. We post our birthday, our photographs and even our opinions online on social media. We know that this information

is publicly accessible. However, our data often travels further than we realise, and can be used in ways that we did not intend. Certain news scandals about data breaches, where personal data has been lost, leaked or shared without consent, have recently made people much more aware of the potential dangers of sharing information online.

So, can we do anything to protect our data? Or should we just accept that in fact nothing is 'free' and sharing our data is the price we have to pay for using many online services? As people are increasingly aware of and worried about data protection, governments and organisations are taking a more active role in protecting privacy. For example, the European Union passed the General Data Protection Law, which regulates how personal information is collected online. However, there is still much work to be done.

As internet users, we should all have a say in how our data is used. It is important that we pay more attention to how data is acquired, where it is stored and how it is used. As the ways in which we use the internet continue to grow and change, we will need to stay informed and keep demanding new laws and regulations, and better information about how to protect ourselves. Safer Internet Day is an ideal time to find out more about this topic.

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