
Editorial

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Biographical notes: Regina Connolly is a Senior Lecturer in Management Information Systems at Dublin City University Business School, Ireland and Director of the MSc in Electronic Commerce programme. In her undergraduate degree she received the Kellogg Award for outstanding dissertation and her MSc degree was awarded with distinction. She was conferred with a PhD in Information Systems from Trinity College Dublin. Her research interests include e-commerce, online trust and privacy issues, website service quality, e-government and strategic information systems. She has served on the expert e-commerce advisory group for Dublin Chamber of Commerce, which has advised national government on e-commerce strategic planning.

Privacy has long been a contentious issue as individuals strive to protect their personal information from misuse by others. However, the exponential growth of the internet, the growing adoption of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and the proliferation of data-gathering technologies has resulted in a vast increase in the collection and dissemination of private and confidential information on the web. One consequence of this is an increase in information privacy concerns among consumers and those who shape public policy.

This lack of confidence in information privacy has been identified as a major factor impeding the potential and growth of the virtual environment. For example, if the commercial potential of the internet is to be realised – a potential that is expanding dramatically as a result of advances in consumer wireless technologies and their transaction-facilitating capabilities – understanding the privacy concerns of online consumers is of critical importance. However, while there is anecdotal evidence that online consumers have concerns regarding the use of their information, to date this topic has received little attention from researchers in general and has been virtually ignored by researchers within the information systems field.

Although the literature on privacy in a virtual environment is limited, what does exist tends to focus on the online marketplace and the fact that consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the ways in which online vendors can collect and use potentially sensitive information regarding them and their actions without their express permission. However, while this is certainly the case, there is need for greater depth in our understanding of the factors that predict and inhibit these concerns, be they individual characteristics, psychological, attitudinal, cultural, contextual or legal. Without such understanding, our ability to address this issue will remain restricted. Moreover, the

predominant focus in the literature on the privacy concerns of online consumers provides only a partial picture as practitioner reports indicate that privacy concerns extend to data monitoring in the technology-enabled work environment and to increasing unease regarding the ubiquity of data gathering technologies in what is fast turning into a networked ambient environment.

I am therefore pleased to assemble some of the leading work on privacy in a virtual environment for this special issue. These papers combine both a theoretical and practical focus on many of the challenges associated with privacy issues in a virtual environment. The first paper by Surendra and Peace provides an overview of group privacy, examines the impact of virtual communities on group privacy, and discusses potential future research in this important area. Sipiior *et al.* focus specifically on the types of consumer information collected during electronic commerce transactions and consumer concerns associated with such practices. They argue that consumer concerns give rise to the necessity for corporations to self-regulate by assessing the risks associated with information privacy practices. In response, they present a conceptual framework for corporate risk assessment of consumer privacy expectations, which can be used by corporations to assess and explain their self-regulation of consumer internet privacy.

For Miltgen, the key focus is an examination of the influence of contextual elements and individual characteristics on willingness to communicate personal data online, while for Zakaria *et al.* the issue of concern is the effect of cultural values and information privacy concerns on the online disclosure behaviours of global customers engaged in e-commerce activities. Both papers provide insight into the predictors and inhibitors of technology-related privacy concerns.

The practical aspects of privacy are addressed by Keaney in her paper which discusses consumer awareness of the protective measures that consumer can take to prevent identity theft. She uses an exploratory approach to measure the self-reported behaviour of undergraduate students from different disciplines and age cohorts and her comparison of data from the USA and Ireland provides interesting conclusions.

Finally, the issue of ambient intelligence and the privacy challenges that it presents is addressed by Kafeza and Kafeza. With new emerging technologies creating a distributed networked environment there are increasing concerns for the preservation of human privacy. These authors identify the characteristics of ambient intelligence and discuss its implications in relation to individuals' privacy. They examine the regulatory privacy framework in the European Union and identify existing inefficiencies to cope with the new challenges associated with ambient intelligence spaces.

The research in this special issue reflects contributions from throughout the world and points to the multi-faceted nature of privacy in a virtual environment. It highlights an increasing recognition among researchers and practitioners of the importance of understanding the factors that predict or inhibit privacy concerns in a virtual environment. I hope this special issue serves as a forum to generate new ideas and greater understanding of a topic that will undoubtedly continue to provide fruitful research challenges for the foreseeable future.

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