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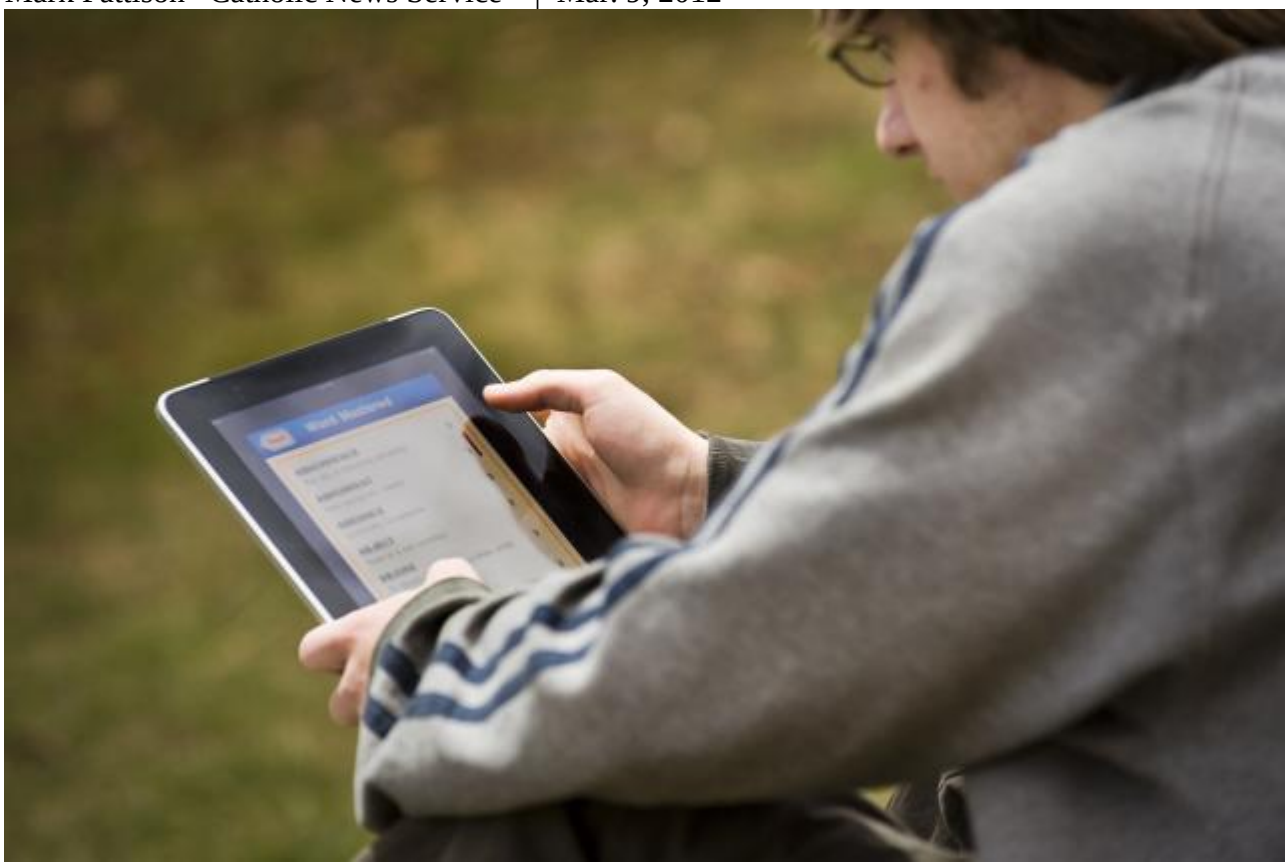
Privacy concerns grow as more websites monitor Americans' online lives

Mark Pattison Catholic News Service | Mar. 9, 2012



A teenager is seen using an iPad on March 5 in St. Louis (CNS photo illustration/Lisa Johnston, St. Louis Review)

WASHINGTON -- In the space of one month, the conversation about life online swiveled from "stop online piracy" to "stop online privacy."

In January, many of the top online websites banded together to fight a bill called the Stop Online Piracy Act. Some even intentionally went dark for a day, strongly hinting to Web users that the online future could be similarly bleak. Key members of the House, including some of the bill's sponsors, got the message loud and clear and shelved the bill without bringing it to a vote.

On Jan. 28, though, online behemoth Google said it would combine its dozens of privacy policies into one. The most profound change, and the one that disturbs computer users most, is that Google will compile all usage on its sites -- including Gmail, YouTube, PayPal and others -- and tailor ads that individual users see according to their online preferences.

Google went ahead with its plan March 1 despite the resulting furor but indicated some support of a "Do Not Track" button on its sites following the Feb. 23 unveiling by the White House of a "Consumer Privacy Bill of Rights."

Daniel Weitzner, the White House's deputy chief technology officer for Internet policy, told the Nextgov website the bill of rights is voluntary because it takes the Federal Communications Commission six years on average to formulate and finalize a policy. "Six years ago there was no Facebook, no social networking really at all," he said. "Six years before that, there was no Google and six years before that there was no commercial Internet."

"We support all of the privacy rights enumerated by this proposal -- individual control, transparency, respect for context, security, access and accuracy, focused collection, and accountability," said a Feb. 28 statement from Bishop John C. Wester of Salt Lake City, the new chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Communications. "The Internet holds great potential. To realize this potential, however, it is essential that Americans know they are not exposing private information when they go online."

Parker Higgins, in a March 2 essay posted on the website of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, suggested principles for a smartphone user's bill of rights that echoed most of Wester's principles.

Higgins also listed a "Do Not Track" option among his suggestions for best technical practices, along with secure data transit and storage, independently conducted and verifiable penetration testing before new apps are introduced, plus anonymizing and obfuscation to preserve user privacy.

"As the mobile app ecosystem has matured, users have come to expect sensible privacy policies and practices. It's time to deliver on those expectations," Higgins said.

Not that Google is the only culprit -- just one of the most ubiquitous. In late February, two lawyers, including the principal owner of baseball's Baltimore Orioles, filed a class-action lawsuit against Facebook. The lawyers contend Facebook installed a system to track users' computer usage even after they left Facebook, all in the name of targeting advertising to their supposed preferences.

Yet as odious -- and a bit creepy -- it seems for websites to be able to track their visitors for advertising purposes, there's already been a well-documented history of Web snooping, stalking and bullying, which has embarrassed and humiliated the targets of these tactics and even driven some to suicide.

"I think most young people haven't thought through the implications of what they post either through their Facebook pages or Twitter," said Bob McCarty, executive director of the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, who also volunteers with the confirmation groups at his home parish, St. Francis of Assisi in Fulton, Md.

"The young people that I work with in their confirmation classes, they don't check their email. If it's not on Facebook, it doesn't happen. They think their world is just their friends. So what they're writing and posting becomes really public in a wider arena than what they're aware."

McCarty recalled one confirmation class where the online world was discussed. "Something came up about Facebook, and I had to say, 'I think college admissions people are checking Facebook. I know employers are checking Facebook pages,'" he remembered saying. "'What you post has implications beyond your friends. It goes to the wider world, and you should think before you post something.' For the freshmen, this was new information."

A new study by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project Internet shows that the number of online social networking has grown six-fold over the last five or six years.

The federation in 2010 issued an eight-page guide, "Recommended Technology Guidelines for Pastoral Work With Young People," to guide youth ministers in navigating the online world. The guide was developed in consultation with the bishops' Secretariats for Child and Youth Protection and Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth and looked at the policies of several U.S. dioceses before coming up with its own recommendations.

By fall, an Internet safety guide, produced jointly by the Catholic church and the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North America will have made it its way to its intended audience: parents.

"While the Internet presents incredible possibilities for Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian families, it also carries many dangers in the form of online pornography, predators, and privacy violation. Navigating this complex world can be overwhelming. Many parents simply don't know where to start," said Dominic Perri, the Catholic co-editor of the booklet, in a March 7 email to Catholic News Service.

Theo Nicolakis, the Greek Orthodox co-editor, told CNS the guide has five objectives: "We are ... trying to give an overview of the potential risks that parents face today; we're trying to set the theological foundation for responsible Internet browsing; we're trying to give practical tips to parents for protecting their children and their families; providing parents with the step-by-step instruction on how to set up parental controls on key devices; and finally, (to) give them some links to additional resources to help them."

Nicolakis said, "We're trying to be multi-mediumed in our approach" to the guide. A booklet, which Perri said would run 24-48 pages, will be printed; Nicolakis said a mini-website will be established for the guide, as well as a PDF document for downloading.

"The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North America has been doing a series of Internet-related safety talks," Nicolakis said, many done by him. "The tipping point was an April (2011) conference titled 'Convergence' in Baltimore sponsored by the Religious Alliance Against Pornography," of which Archbishop George H. Niederauer of San Francisco is a co-chair. The archbishop asked if the two churches could work jointly on a guide.

Nicolakis framed the need for Internet safety this way: "Just because I have the power and the right to use a device, I need to consider what the results are going to be from a theological point of view. I can't divorce my point of view as a Christian with who's going to be affected out there.

"We are all made in the image and likeness of God. We are all icons," he continued. "When we interact online, we are not interacting just with a computer screen, but with someone else who is also of the image and likeness of God. That's what's going to be different with this guide."

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