

Most Unworried about Privacy, but Want Greater Restrictions

Despite the Internet explosion, most Americans remain unworried about invasions of their privacy via computer technology. But more than three-fourths do want greater restrictions on trafficking of their personal information – be it online or off.

Most Americans, 57 percent, don't spend much time worrying that computers and other types of technology are being used to invade their privacy. Forty-two percent have at least some worries, including just 15 percent who worry "a lot."

These numbers haven't changed much since 1994, even with the phenomenal growth of the Internet and the increased potential for privacy violations that has come with it. Just last month, a hacker posted the credit card numbers of 25,000 customers of the CD Universe web site after his demand for \$100,000 wasn't met.

	Use of computers to invade your privacy:	
	Worry	Don't worry
1/26/00	42%	57
6/8/94	38	61

Nearly half the public, 48 percent, now uses a computer to access the Internet, this poll finds. And more than a quarter of Americans have bought something online – 27 percent, up from 19 percent in an ABC News poll just seven months ago.

PRIVACY - About four in 10 people express privacy concerns specifically about buying things online. Forty-one percent say buying things on the Internet threatens their privacy, and 40 percent think it poses more of a privacy threat than buying by mail or in a store.

Online buying threatens privacy		Online buying is more of a threat than mail/store	
Yes	No	Yes	No
41%	47	40%	54

Internet users and nonusers are just as likely to express concerns about online shopping. However, those who have actually purchased something online are much less likely to have these concerns. Only about a quarter of online buyers think shopping over the Internet threatens their privacy, compared to almost half of non-buyers. Online buyers may be reacting to uneventful Internet purchases, while concerns about privacy may be keeping some non-buyers from shopping online.

	Online buying threatens privacy	
	Yes	No
Internet user:		
Yes	42%	53
No	41	41
Internet shopper:		
Yes	26%	70
No	47	38

ACTION – Although concern about privacy is tepid, the public overwhelmingly supports tighter restrictions on the collection and dissemination of information about them. Three-fourths say it should be illegal for companies to sell information about what consumers buy, and even more, 86 percent, don't think official records of things like real estate purchases, court cases and driving records should be publicly available on the Internet.

Internet users are a little less likely than nonusers to support legal restrictions. Even so, an overwhelming majority of Internet users and nonusers alike, as well as big majorities in all demographic groups, support these restrictions.

Though it is generally legal for companies to sell information about their customers, many have policies forbidding it. This week two companies, Chase Manhattan Bank and the e-mail service InfoBeat, reached a settlement with New York's attorney general agreeing no longer to distribute information about their customers to outside companies. Chase had sold customer information to outside marketing companies, in violation of its privacy policy; InfoBeat accidentally sent customers' e-mail addresses to its advertisers, also in violation of its policy.

AGE – People in the youngest and oldest age groups are less concerned about privacy. This is likely the result of differing computer and Internet usage patterns: Younger people are heavier users of computer technology and the Internet, and most of them likely haven't experienced a major privacy violation. Older people are less likely to use this technology and, as a result, may feel inoculated against these types of problems.

Age:	Use of computers to invade your privacy:	
	Worry	Don't worry
18-34	33%	66
35-49	47	53
50-64	56	43
65+	31	65

METHODOLOGY – This ABC News survey was conducted by telephone Jan. 21-26, 2000, among a random national sample of 1,006 adults. The results have a three-point error margin. Fieldwork by ICR-International Communications Research of Media, Pa.

Analysis by Daniel Merkle.

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com on the Internet at:

<http://www.abcnews.com/sections/us/PollVault/PollVault.html>

Here are the full results:

1. Do you use a computer to access the Internet, or not?

	Yes	No	No opin.
1/26/00	48	52	*

2. Have you ever bought anything over the Internet, or not?

	Yes	No	No opin.
1/26/00	27	73	0
6/20/99	19	80	1

3. Do you think that buying things over the Internet threatens your personal privacy, or not?

	Yes	No	No opin.
1/26/00	41	47	12

4. Compared to buying things by mail order or in a store, do you think that buying things over the Internet poses more of a threat to your personal privacy, less of a threat, or about the same?

	More of a threat	Less of a threat	About the same	No opin.
1/26/00	40	7	47	6

5. How much do you worry that computers and technology are being used to invade your privacy - is that something you worry about a lot, some, not much or not at all?

	NET	Worry a lot	Some	NET	Don't Worry Not much	Not at all	No opin.
1/26/00	42	15	26	57	24	33	2
6/8/94	38	9	29	61	34	27	1

6. As you may know, whether or not you shop over the Internet, companies may keep records of the things you buy, and sell those records to other companies for marketing purposes. Do you think it should be legal or illegal for companies to do that?

	Legal	Illegal	No opin.
1/26/00	18	76	6

7. Government agencies keep public records of things like driving records, marriage records, real estate purchases and court cases. Do you think these records should or should not be publicly available over the Internet?

	Should	Should not	No opin.
1/26/00	11	86	3