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## Study: Consumers Equate BT With 'Privacy Harm'

Wendy Davis, Nov 17, 2009 05:54 PM

For more than a decade, Web companies have said that behavioral targeting, or tracking people anonymously as they navigate around the Internet and then serving them targeted ads, doesn't harm users. On the contrary, they argue, such targeting benefits people by providing them with more relevant messages, and also lets marketers spend their ad dollars more efficiently.

When privacy advocates complain about behavioral targeting techniques, industry executives tend to respond by condemning the critics as ivory-tower elitists. But new research is increasingly casting doubt on the idea that the average consumer doesn't care about behavioral targeting.

In September, a telephone survey of 1,000 people [revealed](#) that two out of three Web users didn't want tailored ads. Now, a recent report out by Carnegie Mellon's Aleecia McDonald and Lorrie Faith Cranor concludes that behavioral advertising appears to violate people's expectations and is "understood as a source of privacy harm" by consumers.

For the paper, "An Empirical Study of How People Perceive Online Behavioral Advertising," the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 14 people. The qualitative study was meant to drill down into people's subjective attitudes towards online ad targeting.

The subjects said they understood that advertising supported free content online, and some said that they wanted more relevant ads -- but with one key qualification. "When participants ask for more relevant advertisements, they almost always express a preference for contextual, not behavioral, targeting," the report states.

Talking about ad relevance also brought out consumers' "deep concerns" about privacy, the report says. "Participants' concerns about advertising practices, content, lack of regulation, behavioral targeting and privacy surfaced in the first few minutes of discussion," the report states.

"Participants held a wide range of views ranging from enthusiasm about ads that inform them of new products and discounts they would not otherwise know about, to resignation that ads are 'a fact of life,' to resentment of ads that they find 'insulting,'" the report says. "Many participants raised privacy issues in the first few minutes of discussion without any prompting about privacy."

Even though the respondents were concerned about privacy, none knew much about cookies or how to control cookie-based ads. Nine subjects said they deleted cookies, but only three respondents said that cookies were related to personalized ads online -- and two of those three didn't appear happy about it. One said that she didn't see how cookies could help her, but that she couldn't reject them and still visit the site. A second said that cookies "are used negatively to exploit a person's history" and that they "open pools of information one might prefer to stay private."

None of the respondents had heard of flash cookies -- which sites can use to reconstruct deleted

HTML cookies. One ventured a guess that they "appear in a flash and are gone."

When researchers gave four respondents a printed version of the NAI opt-out page, "substantial confusion" resulted, according to the study. One of the four "expressed concern the NAI opt-out program was actually a scam to gather additional personal information," the report states.

Charles Curran, executive director of the NAI, says the group is working to educate consumers. He added that the four people given a printed copy of the opt-out page might have understood it better if they had visited the site online, where they could also see a video and FAQ.

That might be, but for now the evidence is mounting that consumers don't like behavioral targeting or understand how to control it.