



9-1-1997

Privacy, Security, and Data Integrity

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Recommended Citation

Tenopir, Carol, "Privacy, Security, and Data Integrity" (1997). *School of Information Sciences -- Faculty Publications and Other Works*.

https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_infosciepubs/85

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Privacy, security and data integrity: ASIS members debate balance between rights to access and privacy

Author: Carol Tenopir

Date: Sept. 1, 1997

From: Information Today(Vol. 14, Issue 8.)

Publisher: Information Today, Inc.

Document Type: Article

Length: 1,213 words

Full Text:

The 1997 Mid-year Meeting of the American Society for Information Science (ASIS) was held in Scottsdale, Arizona, the first week of June. As the heat reached triple digits outside, 300 ASIS members and interested others inside held heated discussions on issues surrounding "Information Privacy, Security, and Data Integrity."

The timing was good -- just a week before the Federal Trade Commission hearings about online privacy. A poll released at the hearings showed that over half of the computer users in the U.S. support laws on computer privacy, and major companies such as Microsoft and Netscape are supporting technological safeguards to protect Web site visitors' privacy.

The ASIS meeting held sessions that discussed legal, technological, and ethical protections of online users' privacy. Privacy in the personal arena and privacy in the professional arena were both covered, although there may be inherent conflicts. As individuals, we may want stringent safeguards to protect our privacy, while in our information workplaces we may be charged with gathering as much information as possible about other companies or about individuals.

Anonymity and Self Regulation

A general session featuring an invited expert or experts began each of the three days of ASIS Mid-Year 1997. On day one, Janlori Goldman, deputy director and co-founder of the Center for Democracy and Technology, discussed personal information privacy in a digital age. She pointed out that regular models of law and protection don't work on the Web because the Web environment has evolved into an anonymous place where people can't be sure with whom they are interacting. Most don't want regulations imposed on the Net that would do away with anonymity because they want to be able to protect their personal privacy, even though privacy protection also shields criminals.

Goldman favors self regulation of privacy using technological solutions. (Goldman and other speakers did point out, however, that "people don't care about their privacy when confronted with convenience or great prices.") Automatic privacy protocols would allow individuals to set what information about themselves will be transmitted to Web sites they visit. A privacy message would precede each visit, and if a site does not want to abide by the settings, it can deny access. Legislation would be necessary to allow punishment for Web sites that do not abide by the protocols or that take unauthorized information. Since November 1996, the Privacy Working Group has been developing privacy protocols as part of Web browsers, such as those endorsed by Microsoft and Netscape after the ASIS meeting.

Threats to Information Security

On Tuesday morning, the discussion of privacy and security solutions was continued by Herb Lin, senior staff officer with the Computer Science and Telecommunications Board of the National Research Council. Lin sees two categories of threats to information security. Category one threats are recognized by all as problems, and category two threats are subject to interpretation.

Category one threats include such things as hackers looking for passwords, corrupt or careless medical records clerks, or foreign governments intercepting trade secrets. Category two threats include things such as insurance companies accessing your medical records, local police conducting electronic surveillance, or the FBI decoding encrypted disks of an alleged child pornographer. Technology provides solutions to category one threats, but there are no easy solutions to more subtle threats to privacy.

Lin recommends cryptography as a technological solution to many criminal and privacy threats. He believes the U.S. government should encourage rather than restrict the use of encryption for online messages.

On the last day, Michael Lesk of Bellcore and Bob Frankston of Microsoft led a discussion session on the present and future of privacy and security. Lesk listed the four worst threats to the Internet -- drug dealers, terrorists, foreign spies, and child pornographers -- that may lead Congress to over-regulate the Net. Discouraging anonymity on the Web will help solve many of these threats (much as caller-ID has led to a decrease in obscene phone calls). According to Lesk, "anonymity is not compatible with secure business." But people do not want to give up anonymity; a poll of the audience showed only a few hands of those who would be willing to support regulations that forced identification of visitors to Web sites.

Copyright issues

Technological solutions to copyright violations may be a bit easier to implement. Digital time stamps, digital signatures, watermarks, and image scrambling to prevent downloading are all possibilities. With all other solutions to privacy and security there is the downside of making criminal activities easier.

In addition to many sessions on security and privacy, other topics that were covered include copyright, competitive intelligence, and information policy and regulations. One copyright session brought attendees up-to-date on the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) December 1996 meeting, including WIPO's now well-known failure to reach consensus on increased protection of databases. The European Database Directive means European Union members must pass laws to protect factual databases to a greater extent than they are currently protected in the U.S. Speakers agreed that no significant copyright legislation is likely to pass in the U.S. this year, but that increased protection for compilations and fair use guidelines for electronic publications are coming.

Lance Rose, author of the book *NetLaw*, said that copyright law is not obsolete on the Net, but several things are needed to make copyright work in that environment. Major venues must be kept clear of infringements to "marginalize infringers and drive them underground"; potential infringers must be "scared" by selected high profile lawsuits; easy methods of copyright clearance and online payment schemes must be implemented; and self-help schemes, such as encryption and use metering, are necessary.

The ASIS session on competitive intelligence came just a week after the Society for Competitive Intelligence Professionals' (SCIP) annual meeting. SCIP member Andre Gib, of Arizona Public Service Company, filled in the ASIS members on the rapid growth of SCIP (up to almost 5,000 members in just a few years of existence). Competitive intelligence professionals face issues of privacy and integrity daily, as they attempt to get information about their competitors in an ethical and legal manner. Gib pointed out that much of the information about competitors comes from the competitors themselves -- from employees who, in an attempt to be helpful, share more information than perhaps they should. High-tech solutions will do little to stop this breach in security.

Heightened Awareness

Although no consensus was reached, ASIS Mid-Year attendees went away with a better sense of the complexity surrounding issues of privacy, security, and data integrity. They understood that personal and workplace issues may be contradictory and that convenience often overrides our sense of privacy. All of us will have awakened interest as debates continue, such as the ongoing Federal Trade Commission hearings and controversy surrounding Microsoft and Netscape agreements on security, or collection and dispersion of personal information in databases from the Social Security Administration or LEXIS-NEXIS.

ASIS Mid-Year Meetings are different from the society's annual conference held in the fall. Mid-Years are typically small and focused on a specific theme. Often they are held in resort areas or regions where the annual conference never ventures. Next year's Mid-Year will focus on "Collaboration Across Boundaries," and is tentatively scheduled for May in Orlando, Florida.

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Source Citation (MLA 8th Edition)

Tenopir, Carol. "Privacy, security and data integrity: ASIS members debate balance between rights to access and privacy."

Information Today, Sept. 1997, p. 9+. *Gale Academic Onefile*,

https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A19730013/AONE?u=tel_a_utl&sid=AONE&xid=1123faae. Accessed 10 Nov. 2019.

Gale Document Number: GALE|A19730013