

Few Australians trust social media with personal information but most do little about it

Written by David Glance, Director of UWA Centre for Software Practice, University of Western Australia



Personal Information [Office Australian Information Commissioner](#)

When it comes to privacy, Australians are fairly clear about which organisations they trust and what information they feel uncomfortable sharing. This is according to a recent [report](#) released by the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (OAIC).

According to the report, only 12% of Australians believe that social media companies are trustworthy compared to 79% who trust health service providers and 58% who trust federal government departments.

32% of Australians believe that online services, including social media sites, pose the biggest risk to privacy. 25% of those surveyed also regretted putting information on a social networking site.

Despite this, 61% of respondents didn't regularly read online privacy policies and 43% had not adjusted their privacy settings on social media sites. Australians were also sketchy about their rights, especially Australia's privacy laws, and to whom misuse of personal information should be reported to.

When it comes to attitudes towards online platforms and social media companies in particular, it is hardly surprising that the public should treat them with the greatest suspicion.

Australians trust health service providers that collect their most personal information, but they are storing and using it for the direct benefit of their customers. Social media companies, on the other hand, are using personal information for their own benefit – to drive advertising and make money.

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When asked explicitly whether they would be prepared to trade personal information in exchange for an explicit benefit from a company or organisation, only 33% said that they would be likely to do so. Given this is exactly the exchange that they are undertaking with companies like Facebook and Google, it highlights the fact that people don't generally think of their use of free online services in this way.

It might, however, explain why users of social media services do not trust such services, as 62% of Australians reported being uncomfortable with targeted advertising as a result of online activity.

It is no surprise that people don't read privacy notices for online services, especially those of social media companies. For a start, the terms of a company's privacy policy are rarely explicitly shown to a user before they sign up. For those that want to find out how personal information will be collected and used, they would need to find the privacy policy, read through it, be able to understand it and then be able to make a decision on the basis of that information. That is not a particularly easy task.

A company like Facebook for example, has an extensive [privacy policy](#) that is complicated and understates what Facebook actually does with personal information. Facebook summarises this as:

"We use the information we have to improve our advertising and measurement systems so we can show you relevant ads on and off our Services"

Social media also involves the sharing of information with other people. According to the OAIC report, 63% of people surveyed saw the use of social networking as a public activity rather than a private one.

The Australian Information and Privacy Commissioner, Timothy Pilgrim, [has said](#) in reference to this report that:

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“For businesses, these results show there is still work to do to make privacy easy for customers to manage. Those long-winded privacy notices and complex settings need to be replaced by clear language and point-in-time notifications.”

All companies should show a clearly stated notice before people start using an application or web site, in the same way that Android, and to a lesser extent Apple, displays privacy warnings when installing an app.

The report ultimately shows that educating the public about privacy and encouraging them to report the misuse of personal information will be an ongoing challenge.

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