

What's the Big Deal About Internet Privacy?

Essential Question

How do websites collect your personal information, and what can you do about it?

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to ...

- explore the concept of privacy in both a real-world setting and online.
- understand how and why companies collect information about visitors to their websites.
- learn and use online privacy terms.
- learn that websites are required to post privacy policies.

Materials and Preparation

- Paper and pens
- Copy the **What's Private? Student Handout**, one for each student.
- If students will not have access to computers with an Internet connection, print out privacy policies from two websites that students commonly use. Make copies for each pair of students.

Key Vocabulary –

anonymous: someone who can't be identified based on the information at hand

cookies: small computer text files placed in your computer by the sites you visit that collect information about your computer system and the webpages you view

third party: a person or company other than you and the owner of the website you visit

privacy options: choices a website might give you about what it does with your information

introduction

Warm-up (5 minutes)

TELL your class the following story:

Our principal has hired a research company to collect information that will help us make the school better for you. Several observers will watch students and record where each of you goes, how many times you go there, and how long you stay there, including to the water fountain, your locker, the bathroom, the cafeteria, and to visit another student. You will be identified only by a number. At the end of the day, the research company will put all the data together and write a report for the principal.

ENCOURAGE students to think about what you just told them. Have them jot down any questions or concerns they have, or think other students might have. Then have them share their thoughts with the class.

GUIDE students to consider the following questions:

- Who else might see the information?
- Can people’s identification numbers be linked to their name by the principal?
- Do you think any of the information should remain private?
- Do you think you will be allowed to review the data collected about you?
- Are you satisfied with the explanation that the information is needed “to make the school better,” or do you want to know more about how the information will be used?

EXPLAIN that the story you told is not true; no one will be collecting information about them in the school. However, this is the kind of information that many websites collect whenever you visit them. Companies can learn all kinds of things about you, based on where you go and what you do when you’re online.

DEFINE the Key Vocabulary term **anonymous**. Explain to students that most people think no one knows who they are or what they do when they are online. Believing they are anonymous is why people sometimes do things online that they would not do face-to-face. However, it’s nearly impossible to be completely anonymous online.

teach 1

What’s Private? (20 minutes)

ARRANGE students in pairs.

DISTRIBUTE the **What’s Private? Student Handout**, one for each pair of students.

REVIEW the Key Vocabulary terms **cookies**, **third party**, and **privacy options**. These terms are discussed in more detail on the student handout.

ASSIGN each pair of students one of the following websites, or choose other sites that your class uses. If your class has access to a limited number of computers, you may assign two or more pairs to work at the same computer and look at the same sites; each pair should complete its own handout.

How Stuff Works: www.howstuffworks.com

Google: www.google.com

Wikipedia: www.wikipedia.org

Hulu: www.hulu.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com

EXPLAIN to students that every website has a privacy policy. They can usually find this by looking at the small print at the bottom of the home page and finding the words “Privacy” or “Privacy Policy.”

ASK students to go to their assigned websites and find the privacy policy. On their handouts, have them check off the words that they find on the site and answer the questions about personal information and privacy options.

INVITE pairs of students to share what they found out about the kinds of information their sites collect, and how the sites use the information. Does their site collect personal information? Does it use cookies, or does it give out data to third parties? Does it give them a choice of privacy options? This information is generally included in the privacy policy, though not always.

Then ask students what they think about their site’s privacy policy. Remind them to think back to the real world and how this topic relates to their school.

ASK:

Do you mind that the site collects information about you? Why or why not?

Students may say that they don’t mind but they want to know the site is doing it, or that they don’t like strangers having personal information about them.

Does it make a difference what kind of information your site collects about you?

Make sure students understand the difference between sites that collect personal information such as names, addresses, and email, and sites that collect other information about things they do on the Internet but keep the identities of their visitors anonymous.

What do you get in return for the information? Is the exchange worth it to you?

Students should understand that what they receive is free access to the website. In some cases, sites sell the data to make money, which supports the site. However, not every site does this, and some sites find other ways to support themselves.

closing

Wrap-up (5 minutes)

You can use these questions to assess your students' understanding of the lesson objectives. You may want to ask students to reflect in writing on one of the questions, using a journal or an online blog/wiki.

ASK:

What is a cookie? A third party? A privacy policy? Privacy options?

Students should recall the Key Vocabulary definitions.

Why do website owners want information about their visitors?

They use the information to decide how to change the site, to decide how much to charge advertisers, and to customize a site for each visitor to encourage them to use the site more or, for commercial sites, to buy more. Without your knowledge, some sites may also share your information with others in exchange for more information about you or in exchange for money.

Why is anonymity an important feature of the Internet?

If websites know students' personal information, like their names and addresses, they can use the data or sell the information to third parties.

REMIND students that they can always check a website's privacy policy to find out what that site might do with their personal information. If they don't feel comfortable with the policy, they can leave the site.

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Directions

It's a good idea to check a website's privacy policy before using the site. Look for the words "Privacy" or "Privacy Policy" at the bottom of the home page. Here are some terms you're likely to find in privacy policy notices. Check off the terms you find on your site, and answer the following questions.

- Personally Identifiable Information:** This includes information that reveals who you are in the offline world, including your real name, address, email address, phone number, age, or school.

Does your site collect personally identifiable information? Yes _____ No _____

If so, what kinds?

- Cookies:** Cookies are small computer text files placed in your computer by the sites you visit. These files contain numbers to identify your computer. Cookies can also identify you by any personally identifiable information you may have given to the site.

A cookie records the date and time you visited the site and how long you stayed. It also records which webpages and ads you viewed. The next time you return, the site can present content and ads designed just for you. Many privacy policies include information about the sites' cookies.

Does your site use cookies? Yes _____ No _____ It doesn't say _____

- Third Party:** The word "party" is a legal term for an individual or a company. You (the visitor) are the first party. The site owner is the second party. Any other person or company is the third party.

Most people don't mind sharing information about themselves with site owners to get better service. However, many people DO NOT want their information passed to a third party without their knowledge. A site's privacy policy should tell you if the owner shares your information with third parties.

Does your site share information with third parties?

Yes _____ No _____ It doesn't say _____

Privacy Options: Many sites give you choices about what they do with the information they collect about you. For example, you can tell the site they are not allowed to share their information with a third party.

Does your site offer privacy options? Yes _____ No _____

If yes, what are they?
