

Research Project

‘Kiwis managing their online identity information’

Project Summary

Introduction

This research project looks at the behaviours of New Zealanders in managing their online identity information in a variety of relationships. It aims to meet an important knowledge gap untouched by other existing research initiatives thus far, such as the Kiwis Count Survey organised by the State Services Commission, and follows from a 2010 study ‘Public Attitudes to the Sharing of Personal Information in the Course of Online Public Service Provision’ which focused on the *attitudes* of people towards sharing their identity information online with government agencies, and not their actual *behaviours* in a variety of e-relationships. The research started in April 2013 and is led by Professor Miriam Lips, Chair in e-Government, School of Government, Victoria University of Wellington.

Key issues

Increasingly, individuals are replicating many aspects of their daily ‘offline world’ lives in online environments. For example, in 2011, about 86 per cent of the New Zealand population used the Internet on a regular basis for a variety of activities, such as browsing the web on at least a weekly basis (85 per cent of Internet users), checking their email (98 per cent), downloading music or videos (about 50 per cent), or belonging to a social networking site (64 per cent) (Smith *et al.* 2011). Moreover, online shopping is growing rapidly in New Zealand, rising from 59 per cent of Internet users buying things online in 2007, to 72 per cent in 2011 (*Ibid*). Furthermore, in 2011, 57 per cent had used the Internet to get information on public services and 48 per cent had used public services that are delivered online (*Ibid*).

Another important development in online activities of New Zealanders is the use of an increasing variety of technologies, channels, and devices for online exchanges and relationship management. Recent examples are the use of biometrics, SMS-texting, and handheld wireless devices (e.g. smartphones). At the same time however, although receiving spam has hardly changed since 2007 (approximately 75 per cent of Internet users), the proportion of people who have bought something they feel was misrepresented on a website, has increased from 8 per cent in 2007 to 12 per cent in 2011, and credit card theft has doubled from 1.6 per cent in 2007 to 3.7 per cent in 2011 (*Ibid*). Moreover, Internet users’ confidence in their ability to deal with online security issues has decreased significantly from 42 per cent in 2009 to 30 per cent in 2011 (*Ibid*).

Partly in response to these societal developments, public and private sector organisations too increasingly use online channels for providing services and maintaining relationships with their

customers. For instance, the New Zealand Government has made a clear commitment under the Better Public Services Programme to substantially increase the digital delivery of services to businesses and individuals over the next five years. With Result Area 9, the government aims at creating a one-stop online shop for New Zealand businesses where they can get government advice and only have to provide their information once; Result Area 10 targets on having an average of 70 per cent of New Zealanders' most common transactions with government available in a digital environment by 2017 – up from 24 per cent currently.

Together, these developments point out that the disclosure, sharing, processing, storing, and protection of digital identity information has become indispensable for people and organisations. Simultaneously however, with more and more information exchanges happening online, individuals' attitudes towards key values from the offline world, such as privacy, anonymity, trust, reputation, and transparency, appear to be changing under the possibilities opened up by new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), including both positive opportunities (e.g. increased customer convenience, new forms of social engagement) and the manifestation of new online risks (e.g. identity fraud and theft, information security breaches). Moreover, characteristics of these online environments offer the possibility for individuals to disclose, share, or protect their identity information in different ways compared to identity information exchanges in offline relationships. For example, in online environments, individuals can protect their identity information by using a pseudonym or acting anonymously in interactions with others, which is usually not possible in face-to-face relationships.

Consequently, understanding how people manage their online identity information in varying e-relationships is of critical importance. However, research findings from Canada and the USA demonstrate a significant discrepancy between people's expressed concerns or *attitudes* about their privacy in online relationships and their actual online information *behaviours* (Viseu *et al.* 2004; Fox 2000; Nissenbaum 2010). For example, a survey among approximately 2,000 Internet users in the USA showed that, although respondents generally expressed their concern about their privacy online, only a few had experienced any significant breaches of their privacy and the majority was undertaking trusting and intimate activities online (Fox 2000). Moreover, respondents knew little about how their personal information was used or how to protect their information online (*Ibid*). A few other available studies point out that people's online privacy preferences do not reflect a simple desire to control and withhold identity information, but rather exhibit shifting and finely tuned tendencies to disclose, manage, and control their identity information, depending on context, data recipients, and the sensitivity of the information (Halperin & Backhouse 2008; Olson *et al.* 2005, in: Nissenbaum 2010).

So far however, there is not much empirical, in-depth knowledge available about the online identity information behaviours of individuals, with no research to date about the online identity information behaviours of New Zealanders. For instance, the 2010 research project only looked at the attitudes of individuals towards the sharing of their identity information in e-Government service relationships and did not explore people's actual behaviours therefore. Moreover, the research mainly focused on the sharing and management of identity information in online service relationships with government and did not take into account the sharing and management of people's identity information in other e-relationships, such as with varying private sector organisations, NGOs, colleagues, friends, or family. With the 2010 research findings pointing out substantial differences in the attitudes of different groups of New Zealanders towards privacy, security, and trust in e-Government service relationships, the assumption is that New Zealanders also may differ in their online identity information behaviours in varying e-relationships and online activities. Furthermore, with cybercrime, including identity fraud and theft, on the rise in New Zealand and internationally, it is timely to explore the actual experiences of New Zealanders with varying forms of this phenomenon and get an understanding of what they do in response.

Key details

The objective of the proposed research activity is to get a deeper understanding of the online identity information behaviours of New Zealanders in varying e-relationships enabled by different online channels or devices and identify effective solutions for the New Zealand government in managing risks around online identity information behaviours and people's experiences with cybercrime.

The research will focus on the following three questions:

1. *What are the identity information behaviours of different members of the New Zealand general public in using varying online channels for a wide range of e-relationships and online activities?*
2. *What are the actual experiences of different members of the New Zealand general public with forms of cybercrime and how did they respond?*
3. *Based on these empirical research findings, what are solutions for the New Zealand government in managing risks around online identity information behaviours and people's experiences with cybercrime?*

In order to gain a broad and deep understanding of what New Zealanders are actually doing online with their identity information in a variety of relationships and activities, including managing their identity information in online interactions with government, and what their experiences are with, and responses to, forms of cybercrime, a mixed-method research approach is used involving the following research methods:

- A quantitative online survey with a representative sample of New Zealanders;
- Participant observation of online identity information behaviours from representatives of different groups of the New Zealand population; and
- Ten focus group meetings with representatives of different groups of the New Zealand population.

The findings from these three research streams will be discussed in three solution-focused workshops with public officials, stakeholders and experts.

The timeline for this project is 12 months.

The intention is to repeat this study every two years, so that longitudinal patterns of online identity information management by New Zealanders can be explored.

Project outputs

The research findings will be published in a research report available via the e-Government Chair website and presented at one or more public seminars. Furthermore, it is expected that several academic conference papers and peer-reviewed academic journal articles will be published on the basis of the research findings.

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