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Find out what your digital footprint means

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Your digital footprint is bigger than you would have ever thought.

MOST of us go about our daily lives blissfully unaware we are continually building an online portrait of ourselves.

This online identity or digital footprint specifically describes the trail we leave from our actions in cyberspace.

This information can be broken down into active and passive data traces.



Rob Livingstone Source:Supplied

Active data traces refer to actions carried out intentionally by internet users, such as posting on social media, uploading videos or making phone calls.

Passive data traces, on the other hand, refer to online activities in which users don't purposefully put out data.

These include website visits, tailored browser searches or the use of smart televisions.

IT consultant and fellow at Sydney's University of Technology Rob Livingstone has built a career in the field of big data and online privacy.

He said it is too difficult to give exact statistics on the amount of data people leave, but confirmed every time we perform an online action, we are contributing to our digital footprint.

Considering how integrated technology is in our society, this is an intriguing thought.

Tracking our movements

Mr Livingstone said our digital footprints are more public than we would ever imagine.

Using Google accounts as an example, Mr Livingstone was able to point out how informative our online identity could be.

"Anyone using their Gmail account with default settings would be able to have to their movements tracked," he said.

"There is fair bit of behind-the-scenes data being generated and this can be used to provide a map of where the phone has been."

This becomes evident when we login to [location history](#) on Google Maps with the account we use on our smart phone.

Using this service people can see records of everywhere they have been during that month.

Pretty scary when you think of all the apps running location services.



The themes explored in the 1999 film *Enemy of the State* are even more true today. Source: News Corp Australia

How much is stored and what is it used for?

In the current digital landscape, the amount of our data stored depends on the service provider and information provided.

“Social media for example will only hold the information for as long as you wish. You can always delete your profile,” he said.

“However, just because you have deleted it doesn’t mean it has been removed from the back end systems.”

The reason the data is stored has less to do with stalkishly tracking our movements and is more to do with digital advertising.

Mr Livingstone said the information obtained flows into big data infrastructures around the world.

“Larger corporations like Microsoft, Google and Facebook will take this data and repurpose it for monetary reasons,” he said.

“They use the information for targeted advertising campaigns to increase revenue.”

Facebook Gives Advertisers More User Data 3:50



Facebook plans to expand the information it gives advertisers by including data about user web-browsing habits. Will this backfire with users?

What are the risks?

While targeted advertising might have its benefits for users, there is also a dark side we must be wary of when leaving digital footprints.

Mr Livingstone said cybercrime poses the single biggest threat to individuals using the internet.

“The most genuine risks that come to mind have to do with hacking and identify theft,” he said.

“A lot of information you provide online is uniquely identifiable to you as an individual and if someone can gain access to this they can take your identity.”

Like all things, it comes down to risk versus reward in these types of scenarios.



Cyber criminals pose a whole new threat. Source: Supplied

How can we protect ourselves?

While it is near impossible to have no digital footprints, there are simple steps you can take to reduce your digital identity.

“Before you install an app, you should read in the settings what information is being stored and base your decision off that,” he said.

“Only use trusted sources and make sure you switch off settings you don’t need because applications are usually designed to be favourable to the providers.

“Additionally, if a website asks you to enter personal details such as your birthdate, it is better to provide false information when possible.”



It is best to keep them guessing Source:Supplied