Chapter IX

Public Opinions of Online Privacy: Definitions, Assessment and Implications for Industry and Public Policy

Kim Sheehan
University of Oregon, USA

Abstract

Past research has indicated that public opinion polls can have a strong effect on public policy decisions. Since the advent of a commercialized Internet, numerous polls have assessed American’s views on privacy in both the online and off-line context. Privacy is arguably a highly salient issue among Americans today, with one poll showing that online Americans are more concerned about privacy than health care, crime, and taxes (National Consumer League, 2000). Privacy, though, is a complex concept that may be difficult to measure using simple polling questions. A five-dimension framework of privacy (awareness, usage, type of information, relationship, and compensation) is used to examine how well current privacy polls measure the privacy construct. Taken as a whole, the poll questions do an adequate job of addressing four of the five dimensions of the privacy framework. However, many polls ask about privacy concern using only one question. Few polls offer a range of questions that can help best understand this complex construct.
Introduction

Public opinion is the expressed views of a group of people about issues of common interest or concern (Sheatsley, 2000). The measurements of public opinions on topics of concern, reported by a variety of public opinion polls throughout the media, are used by a range of groups to help facilitate decision making. For example, candidates for public office use public opinion polls to track their campaigns and determine which issues to highlight and which to avoid in their campaign messages. Marketers use such polls to examine one brand’s positions relative to other brands and to come up with new product ideas. Our elected officials use public opinion polls to analyze and assess public policy and to determine the types of laws that may be necessary to implement in our society.

Public opinion polls serve an important role in society because they have the potential to affect public policy. Numerous meta-analyses suggest that there is a strong and resilient link between public opinion and policy (Stimson, MacKuen, & Erickson, 1995). In fact, Stimson et al. suggest that opinion change was congruent with policy change for about two-thirds of issues covered in surveys. What this means is that if there were increases in levels of concern to a topic, then public policy would be changed to address the topic. Therefore, poll results create expectations, frame political discourse and, in the absence of strong and sustained reporting on the facts underlying an issue, polls can and do shape and create opinion.

Efforts to ascertain public opinions are characteristic of a democratic society. For online marketers, this connection is important given that much of the future of online marketing rests on whether the government becomes involved in crafting laws about online information collection and dissemination. Online marketers would prefer that a self-regulatory system monitor online data collection. Indeed, independent entities such as TrustE and BBB online provide “seals of approval” to many e-commerce sites that wish to signal to consumers that their online data collection practices meet certain criteria regarding privacy and data usage (Miyazaki and Krishnamurthy, 2002). What other types of regulatory mechanisms will evolve depend, at least in part, on public opinion.

This chapter will examine how polls define online privacy, and discuss how such definitions may impact both public policy and online marketing.

Role of Privacy and Privacy Polls in Society

Online privacy is of interest to many different stakeholders in the Internet society. The interactive nature of the Internet allows for a two-way communication between a variety of pairs of individuals: for example, politicians and constituents, teachers and students, doctors and patients, and marketers and consumers. A byproduct of such exchanges can be an electronic “paper trail” of information about both parties. This information can be used for a number of different purposes: to craft Web pages that are easy to navigate and provide information in an easy way; to develop new products, and to craft online
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