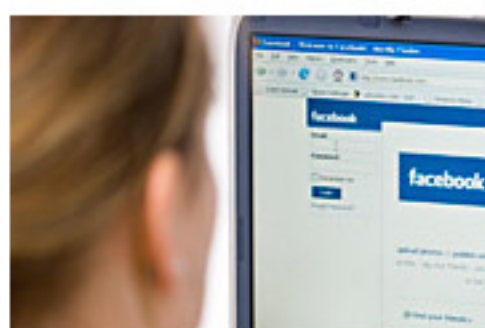**GOETHE-INSTITUT**

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Data Striptease on the World Wide Web – Consequences of Carelessness

The "get involved" mentality of many Internet users undermines data security, as they voluntarily disclose all manner of private information in electronic networking sites. However, those who use other free services like search engines also give away a lot about themselves.

Carelessness online has created a gap in the market in Germany as elsewhere. Companies with names like *Datenwachschutz* (i.e. Data Security Guard), *Saubere Weste* (i.e. Clean Record) and *Reputation-Defender* earn their money by removing unwanted information from websites. "One of our customers had talked extensively about his past drug use in a forum, and happened to use his own name", explains Susanne Wilberg, managing director of a company called *Dein guter Ruf.de* (i.e. Your Good Reputation). "We negotiated with the website operator and succeeded in having the information deleted."

In Wilberg's experience, "The younger generation is still extremely thoughtless when it comes to their personal data on the Internet, though there is a lot of ignorance among older people, too." What is more, many users do not realize that the Web forgets nothing: all information that has been posted on the Internet can be copied and archived at any time, and can therefore not be deleted with absolute certainty.

Boom in social networks

The success of Web 2.0, Internet that anyone can get involved in, continues unabated. Particular popularity is enjoyed by social networks like Facebook, MySpace and StudiVZ, where users can create their own profile, adding photos and personal details, in order to establish contact with other members.

According to an online study conducted by German public service broadcasters ARD and ZDF in 2008, nearly a third of all Internet users are a member of at least one private or professional network. Within a year, use of private networks at least once a week increased three-fold, and currently stands at 18 percent. Younger online users are even more active, with nearly half of 14 to 29-year-olds surfing private networks at least once a week. StudiVZ alone claims to have over 13 million members.

The more open you are, the more contacts you get

Anyone who joins the throng in social networks faces a dilemma. "The more personal details you disclose, the greater your likelihood of making new contacts", notes a study carried out by the Berlin University of the Arts in 2008, in which three fictitious characters on the Web were observed for one entire month. "The candid student received far more offers of contact than her two more reserved colleagues", summarizes Wilberg, who commissioned the study.

Among Internet users, the number of contacts displayed for a particular profile in the networks is regarded as a status symbol: someone who is well-known has a certain prestige. "In an era of casting shows and jungle camps, an entire generation is being led to believe that anyone can be a superstar," says NRW Data Security Report 2009. Apparently, all that counts is for one to present oneself correctly.

### Bill is paid using personal data

Nonetheless, the brave new world of the virtual community has its pitfalls – and it is not only people seeking contact with others who are interested in the user profiles. Nowadays there are search engines that can trawl through online communities. According to a survey done in 2007 by the Federal Association of German Management Consultants, a good third of personnel consultants use the Internet to gain an impression of applicants. The tabloids likewise take advantage of the Internet: when two students died in an accident in April 2007, Bild, Germany's leading tabloid newspaper, printed photographs of the victims, one image having been taken from their StudiVZ profiles, according to bildblog.de. The same source claimed that in January 2008 the Sunday edition of the paper, Bild am Sonntag, used the StudiVZ photograph of a young woman who had been killed in a skiing accident.

The network operators also have their own interests to pursue, as the user profiles provide them with a source of income. Although membership of the social networking sites is free, a bill has to be paid nonetheless – in the form of personal data that the operators use for personalized advertising. At the end of 2007, StudiVZ confirmed that it had introduced targeted banner advertising, which is based on aspects such as age, gender, address and degree course subject. Lipstick adverts are shown only to women, while men are presented with adverts for razors. StudiVZ denies that personal data are sold on to third parties.

"Digital exhibitionism of users"

When presenting his annual report in April 2009, Peter Schaar, Federal Commissioner for Data Protection, criticized the "digital exhibitionism of users", which opens the door to abuse of data. At the same time, he pointed to the problem of "the wide-scale registration of interests and behaviours". After all, it is not only in social networks that users are only too happy to disclose their data: information is automatically siphoned off when other free Internet services are used, such as search engines, route planners, video portals, online photo albums and e-mail services.
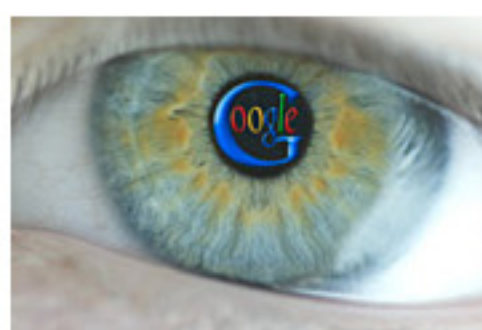
"Google is one of the most outstanding examples of a company that grabs all the data it can", says padeluun, an artist and co-founder of the Bielefeld-based data protection association FoeBuD that presents Big Brother Awards each year for violations of data protection. "Google says: we collect everything, check what we can do with it, and then use it – while claiming to do nothing but good." Ultimately, it is all about advertising customers in this case. "A company's only interest is in making money", explains padeluun. "As a user, I must understand that within the framework of supply and demand I am an object whose purpose is to open its wallet."

This is entirely in the interests of the advertising industry. In The Economist in 2006, Rishad Tobaccowala, manager of one of the world's largest advertising companies, praised advertising based on Internet technologies. Conventional advertising, he said, could be likened to bombing a city, and it is not clear who the adverts actually reach. Intelligent Internet adverts, on the other hand, are more efficient: "Advertising companies now manufacture numerous spearheads and persuade people to skewer themselves."

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