Groundhog Day
Internet's Reliance on Personal Data May Make Privacy Impossible, Some Panelists Say
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It's appropriate to discuss the issue of Internet privacy on Groundhog Day since it's an issue that never goes away, said an industry consultant Monday as panelists debated privacy at an event hosted by Dialogue on Diversity. "We take privacy as a Constitutional right," but it's a right that technology has taken away from people, said e-Copernicus President Gregory Rohde. Much of the value of the Web is based on personal data, said another panelist, as an FTC official said data brokers can collect larges amount of information.

One U.S. data broker said it had about 3,500 pieces of information on every person in America, said the FTC official, Ruth Yodaiken, an attorney in the Consumer Protection Bureau who works on identity theft issues. The FTC and FCC are working together and with law enforcement, said Yodaiken and Eric Bash, FCC Enforcement Bureau associate chief. They said the goal is to ensure companies are being fair and not misleading when it comes to consumer data collection and sharing, and enforcing regulations designed to protect consumer privacy and security.

The Internet has "remarkable and wonderful" components, Rohde said, but the mass collection of data on the Internet is vulnerable to abuse by those who collect it and "bad guys." Rohde used an example of a health app automatically installed on his iPhone. The app recorded how many miles he had walked, how many steps he had taken, stairs he had climbed and other health information. "Bad guys" or law enforcement may not care about how many miles an individual walks, but by using the data collected by the app, law enforcement also can know exactly where you walked, Rohde said. Technology is more sophisticated than the most privacy savvy consumers, said Rohde, thanking President Barack Obama for commenting on this issue during a speech at the FTC a few weeks ago (see 1501120043).

At least half of the Internet's economic value is based on consumer data, said Fred Campbell, director of the Center for Boundless Innovation in Technology. Limiting the amount of personal data that's collected would be a "fundamental transformation of the Internet," he said. Since companies like Facebook and Google reported billions of dollars in advertising revenue, Campbell said, the stakes are high for companies that "have every intention of protecting these revenue streams." Proposals to eliminate third parties from accessing consumers' information

"could make matters worse for consumers," Campbell said, since the data still would be collected and used by first parties such as Google, which are among the biggest data collectors. There would be a higher concentration of data in fewer places, he said.

Consumers may demand privacy protections on the Internet, but there's no such thing as a free lunch, Campbell and Rohde said. The Internet is largely protected by privacy clauses in a handful of laws, but part of the reason that the Internet and features such as Gmail are free is that companies profit from consumers' data, they said. The European Union's court ruling upholding the right to be forgotten may not be practical, Rohde said, adding his concerns largely are related to the abuse of the information, not that it's collected. But big data can be used for good things, such as tracking health information or climate change, said Nicol Turner-Lee, Multicultural Media, Telecom and Internet Council vice president-research and policy. Using the data to profile people is bad, she said.

written by Katie Rucke