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# Reputation Management and Social Media

How people monitor their identity and  
search for others online

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## Summary of Findings

Reputation management has now become a defining feature of online life for many internet users, especially the young. While some internet users are careful to project themselves online in a way that suits specific audiences, other internet users embrace an open approach to sharing information about themselves and do not take steps to restrict what they share. Search engines and social media sites play a central role in building one's reputation online, and many users are learning and refining their approach as they go--changing privacy settings on profiles, customizing who can see certain updates and deleting unwanted information about them that appears online.

Over time, several major trends have indicated growth in activities related to online reputation management:

- Online reputation-monitoring via search engines has increased – 57% of adult internet users now use search engines to find information about themselves online, up from 47% in 2006.
- Activities tied to maintaining an online identity have grown as people post information on profiles and other virtual spaces – 46% of online adults have created their own profile on a social networking site, up from just 20% in 2006.
- Monitoring the digital footprints of others has also become much more common—46% of internet users search online to find information about people from their past, up from 36% in 2006. Likewise, 38% have sought information about their friends, up from 26% in 2006.

Young adults are the most active online reputation managers in several dimensions. When compared with older users, they more often customize what they share and whom they share it with.

Those ages 18-29 are more likely than older adults to say:

- **They take steps to limit the amount of personal information available about them online**—44% of young adult internet users say this, compared with 33% of internet users between ages 30-49, 25% of those ages 50-64 and 20% of those ages 65 and older.
- **They change privacy settings** - 71% of social networking users ages 18-29 have changed the privacy settings on their profile to limit what they share with others online. By comparison, just 55% of SNS users ages 50-64 have changed the default settings.
- **They delete unwanted comments** - 47% social networking users ages 18-29 have deleted comments that others have made on their profile, compared with just 29% of those ages 30-49 and 26% of those ages 50-64.
- **They remove their name from photos** - 41% of social networking users ages 18-29 say they have removed their name from photos that were tagged to identify them, compared with just 24% of SNS users ages 30-49 and only 18% of those ages 50-64.

Compared with older users, young adults are not only the most attentive to customizing their privacy settings and limiting what they share via their profiles, but they are also generally less trusting of the sites that host their content. When asked how much of the time they think they can trust social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn, 28% of SNS users ages 18-29 say “never.” By comparison, a smaller segment of older users express such cautious views; 19% of SNS users ages 30-49 and 14% of those ages 50-64 say they never trust the sites.

The increased prevalence of self-monitoring and observation of others creates a dynamic environment where people promote themselves or shroud themselves depending on their intended audience and cir-

cumstances. There are good reasons to be more vigilant. Online reputation matters; 44% of online adults have searched for information about someone whose services or advice they seek in a professional capacity. People are now more likely to work for an employer that has policies about how they present themselves online and co-workers and business competitors now keep closer tabs on one another. Those who are dating are more likely to research their potential mates online. And even neighbors have become more curious about finding information about one another online. Yet, even those who are careful about their own disclosures have to stay on top of the identifying material that others may have posted about them on social networking profiles, photo- and video-sharing sites, Twitter, and blogs.

- 27% of employed internet users now work for an employer that has policies about how they present themselves online—such as what they can post on blogs and websites or what information they can share about themselves. That compares to 22% in 2006.
- 31% of employed internet users have searched online for information about co-workers, professional colleagues or business competitors, up from 23% in 2006.
- 16% of all internet users have looked online for more information about someone they were dating or in a relationship with, up from 9% in 2006. Among those who use online dating sites, 34% go online to check up on their dates.

Social networking users are especially attuned to the intricacies of online reputation management. Two-thirds now say that they have changed the privacy settings for their profile to restrict what they share with others online. Most have also chosen to prune certain friends from their networks when they become too large or contacts fall out of favor, and many actively “revise” the information that others post about them.

- 65% of adult social networking users have changed the privacy settings on their profile to limit what they share with others online.
- 56% have “unfriended” contacts in their network--deleting people from their friends list—and 52% have kept some people from seeing certain updates.
- 36% have deleted comments that others have made on their profile, and 30% have removed their name from photos that were tagged to identify them.

Many are finding that sharing a certain amount of information online has clear benefits:

- Internet users are now twice as likely to be found by friends from the past-- 40% of internet users say they have been contacted by someone from their past who found them online, up from 20% who reported the same in 2006.
- Half of online adults (48%) agree that getting to know new people now is easier and more meaningful because you can learn things online about the people you meet.

Others are required to share information about themselves online as part of their profession:

- 12% of employed adults say they need to market themselves online as part of their job. While 15% of employed men say they have a job that requires them to self-promote online, just 7% of employed women say this.

And whether they are actively trying to get recognized or fly under the radar, most internet users report some level of “privacy through obscurity” – there is information about them online, but it takes some digging to find.

- When self-searchers query their name using a search engine, the majority (63%) say they find at least some relevant material connected to their name. But 35% of self-searchers say their queries do not yield any relevant results.
- Just 31% of self-searchers say that most of the results on the critical first page are actually about them, while 62% say the first page of results is mostly about someone else with a name very similar or identical to theirs.

Stories of reputational mishaps abound and persist online—particularly among celebrities, politicians and other prominent figures. Yet, relatively few among the internet masses have had bad experiences due to undesirable information being circulated about them online.

- 4% of online adults say they have personally had bad experiences because embarrassing or inaccurate information was posted about them online, a number that is unchanged since 2006.
- 8% have requested that someone remove information about them that was posted online, including things like photos or videos. The vast majority (82%) say they are usually successful at getting that content taken down.

Over time, internet users have actually become less concerned about the amount of information available about them online—just 33% of internet users say they worry about how much information is available about them online, down from 40% in December 2006. However, most of this decrease is attributable to those who have never used a search engine to check up on their digital footprints. Those who do monitor their search results are more likely than non-searchers to express concern (37% vs. 27%).

## Introduction

Managing an online identity has become a multimedia affair. Not only can internet searchers type in queries about someone who has aroused their curiosity, they also can seek pictures, videos, and real-time status updates online. Location-based awareness in mobile devices adds another layer of information that can be searched. Avid users of mobile devices may voluntarily reveal their identity and location to certain websites, thereby allowing almost anyone to learn their whereabouts. Surveillance, even the most benign kind, has moved out of the realm of private investigators and into the hands of the general public.

Much has changed since our 2007 *Digital Footprints* report. At the time, the idea of the then-new facial recognition technology being touted by photo search services like Polar Rose seemed radical. Today, facial recognition technology is standard in many new digital cameras, and applications like Polar Rose are soon going to be fused with the cameras and internet connections on users' phones. Google Goggles, a service that lets you use pictures taken with your mobile device to search the Web, doesn't offer facial recognition for now, but the underlying capability is there.<sup>1</sup> As with any major technological advance, there are great potential benefits and risks associated with how these tools ultimately get used. See someone at a conference that you recognize but can't remember his name? Aim your camera at him and instantly pull up the search results connected with his image online. Having a drink at a bar? Would you mind if another patron who took a liking to you could snap a picture and look you up? Planning on attending a political protest? Would you reconsider if you knew you could instantly be identified by the counter-protesters?

Even those who choose to be relatively conservative with the information they share on the internet—favoring usernames in lieu of real names when posting comments or creating an online profile—are becoming easier and easier to identify. According to one prominent study from the field of re-identification research, the vast majority of Americans (87%) can be identified with only three pieces of information: gender, zip code and date of birth.<sup>2</sup> Given that this information is easily gleaned from many online profiles created for popular sites like Facebook, users may be more exposed than they realize. Other new studies have shown that seemingly anonymous profiles that express unique preferences—such as movie lists on Netflix—can be used to identify users.

Recent changes in the default settings associated with Facebook and the launch of Google Buzz have prompted a heated public discussion about whether or not the public cares about “privacy” at all.<sup>3</sup> But as prominent legal scholars and social media experts have repeatedly argued, a user's sensitivity to specific privacy concerns is highly dependent on context and is often oversimplified.<sup>4</sup> For instance, a user of a social networking site may not care if friends and family know that she is a fan of a certain politi-

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1 Google has publicly stated that they have made a deliberate decision to withhold facial recognition features from the public version of Google Goggles for now, but prominent technology experts like Tim O'Reilly have had “full versions” of the Google Nexus One phone demonstrated to them, showing the ability of the phone's camera to detect and accurately identify an individual. See: <http://radar.oreilly.com/2010/01/the-nexus-one-vs-iphone.html>

2 See “Computational Disclosure Control,” by Latanya Sweeney. Available at: <http://groups.csail.mit.edu/mac/classes/6.805/articles/privacy/sweeney-thesis-draft.pdf>

3 For instance, see: “Beyond Google and Evil: How Policy Makers, Journalists and Consumers Should Talk Differently About Google and Privacy” by Chris Hoofnagle (<http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2326/2156>)

4 For example, see: *Understanding Privacy* by Dan Solove (<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674035072>) and “Making Sense of Privacy and Publicity” by danah boyd (<http://www.danah.org/papers/talks/2010/SXSW2010.html>).

cal candidate on Facebook, but she may prefer not to broadcast those preferences to her employer or neighbors.

One of the interesting tensions inherent in the realm of online reputation management is that users want to have a sense of control over their information, but they sometimes take the path of least resistance when making choices about how they manage their profiles and other content connected to their name online. Whether that means accepting the default privacy settings of an application or skipping over the fine print in a “terms of service” agreement, decisions about how one’s identity is communicated to the world can be made in haste and under the assumption that everyone experiences some level of “privacy through obscurity.”

Popular media coverage of young adults and technology use has often suggested that younger generations have little regard for practicing discretion when sharing information online.<sup>5</sup> However, the findings in this report suggest that, when compared with older users, young adults are more active online reputation managers in several dimensions. When compared with older users, they more often customize what they share and limit whom they share it with. Other recent research has also disputed the notion that young adults and even teenagers simply “don’t care” about privacy.<sup>6</sup>

Personal information has become a form of currency that is shared and exchanged in the social marketplace today. Yet, while the management of users’ online identities has arguably become more complex and multi-faceted over time, internet users have become less likely to worry about the amount of information available about them online.

However, it is important to note that the results from this survey do not indicate that internet users care any less about retaining control over their personal information online. Many people simply are not aware of what is actually available about them; the overall drop in those who say they worry is primarily among those who have never used a search engine to look up their own names online. Likewise, a general lack of concern about the amount of information connected to one’s name online does not preclude a user from having a wide range of specific concerns about how that information might be used—whether those worries relate to the security of financial information, advertisers’ access to personal information shared on a social networking site, or government surveillance of online activities. For example, recent research has suggested that the majority of American adults do not want internet marketers to tailor advertising to their interests—particularly when that involves online data collection and monitoring.<sup>7</sup>

While online advertising plays an increasingly influential role in the way that internet users’ information is gathered, stored and sold, this survey did not address specific concerns about data collection by marketers. Instead, this report examines the everyday choices that internet users make about communicating their identity to the world and the ways in which they consume the information that others share about themselves. At the heart of the social media explosion are millions of individual users, each contributing their share of content, and each with a reputation at stake.

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5 See, for instance: “Kids, the Internet, and the End of Privacy: The Greatest Generation Gap Since Rock and Roll,” by Emily Nussbaum. *New York Magazine*. Available at: <http://nymag.com/news/features/27341/>. See also, a quote from the forthcoming book by David Kirkpatrick, *The Facebook Effect*: “The older you are, the more likely you are to find Facebook’s exposure of personal information intrusive and excessive.”

6 See “How Different are Young Adults from Older Adults When it Comes to Information Privacy Attitudes and Policies,” Chris Hoofnagle et al. Available at: [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1589864](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1589864). See also: “Youth, Privacy and Reputation,” Alice E. Marwick, et al. Available at: [http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/publications/2010/Youth\\_Privacy\\_Reputation\\_Lit\\_Review](http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/publications/2010/Youth_Privacy_Reputation_Lit_Review)

7 See, for instance, a recent and detailed study of Americans’ views towards privacy and tailored advertising online: Joseph Turow et al., “Americans Reject Tailored Advertising and Three Activities that Enable It.” Available at: [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1478214](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1478214)

## Methodology Note

This report is based on the findings of a daily tracking survey on Americans' use of the internet. The results in this report are based on data from telephone interviews conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International between August 18 to September 14, 2009, among a total sample of 2,253 adults, age 18 and older including 560 cell phone interviews. Interviews were conducted in both English (n=2,179) and Spanish (n=74) and all interviews were conducted via telephone. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects is plus or minus 2.3 percentage points. For results based on internet users (n=1,698), the margin of sampling error is plus or minus 2.7 percentage points. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting telephone surveys may introduce some error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

A combination of landline and cellular random digit dial (RDD) samples was used to represent all adults in the continental United States who have access to either a landline or cellular telephone. Both samples were provided by Survey Sampling International, LLC (SSI) according to PSRAI specifications. A more detailed discussion of the sampling methods used for this survey is provided in the last section of this report.

# Part 1: Managing the ever-expanding reach of our digital footprints

## Searching for ourselves online

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### **The majority of adult internet users (57%) now use search engines to find information about themselves online, up from 47% in 2006.**

Internet users have become increasingly likely to use search engines to check up on their digital footprints. Since our last survey in 2006, search engines have vastly expanded their reach and now include everything from images and videos to real-time results on Twitter.

In the September 2009 survey, 57% of adult internet users said they had used a search engine to look up their name and see what information was available about them online. That marks a significant increase since 2006 when 47% of adult internet users said they had searched for results connected to their names online. However, that growth is more modest when compared with the 25-point increase that occurred between 2001 and 2006 (when self-searching jumped from 22% to 47%).

What has not changed over the years are some of the core demographic trends with this activity. Male and female internet users are equally likely to use a search engine to monitor their digital footprints. And internet users under the age of 50 are consistently much more likely to be self-searchers when compared with older users. Likewise, those with higher income and education levels are much more engaged than those in lower socioeconomic groups when it comes to monitoring digital footprints. In the latest survey, 70% of internet users with a college degree had conducted a search for their name compared with just 43% of those with a high school degree or less.

### **Adults under the age of 50 are still more likely than older adults to monitor their digital footprints.**

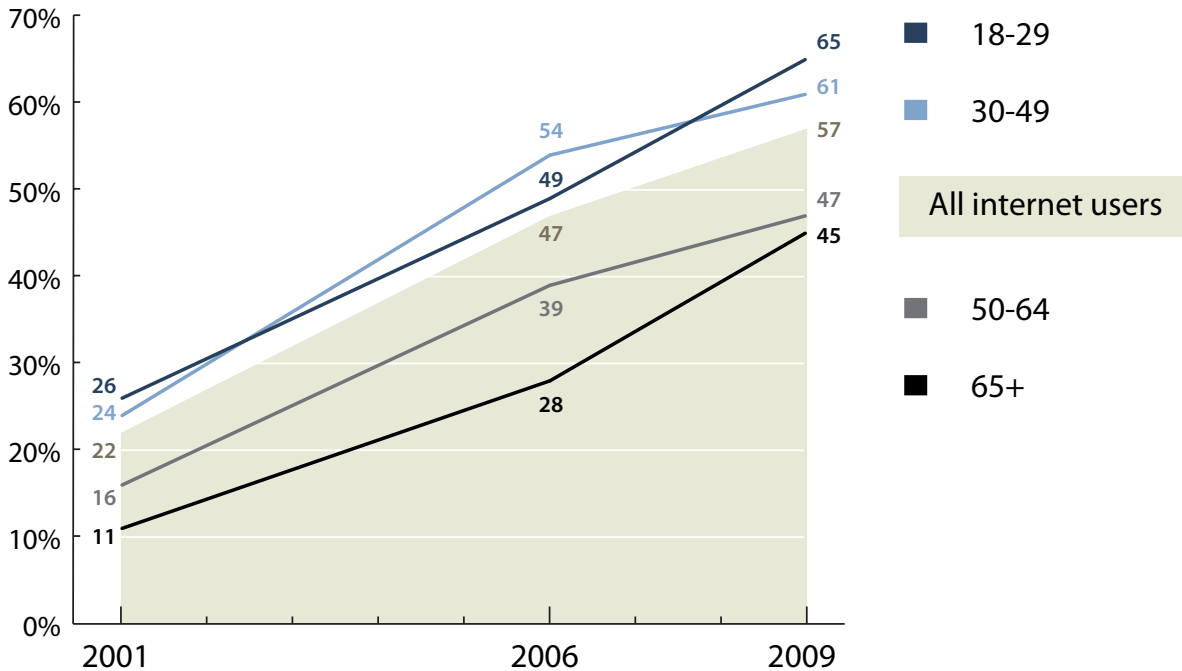
Internet users under the age of 50 consistently surpass older online adults in their self-searching habits. In 2009, fully 65% of young adult internet users ages 18-29 said they had searched for results connected to their name online, up from 49% in 2006. Likewise, 61% of internet users ages 30-49 said they were self-searchers, up from 54% in 2006.

By comparison, less than half (47%) of internet users ages 50-64 have used a search engine to check up on the results tied to their name (up from 39% in 2006). About the same number, 45% of those ages 65 and older, use search engines to look up results connected to their names. However, that number represents significant growth since 2006, when just 28% of users age 65 and older had conducted a personal name search.



# Searching for ourselves

% of internet users who have ever used an online search engine to look up their own name or see what information about them is on the internet, by age group



The 2009 survey included interviews with both English-dominant and Spanish-dominant Hispanic adults. Self-identified Hispanic internet users in this sample were significantly less likely than white internet users to use a search engine to find results connected to their names online; just 40% of Hispanic internet users said they had done this, compared with 60% of white internet users. Half of African-American internet users (52%) said they had searched for results about themselves—a number that is not significantly higher or lower than other groups.

## Most self-searchers continue to be casually curious; few monitor their footprints with great regularity.

Although there has been significant growth in the self searching population overall, most internet users do not regularly rely on search engines to monitor their digital trails. Among the 57% of internet users who are self-searchers, few make a steady habit of monitoring their online presence.<sup>8</sup> In 2006, 74% of self-searchers said that they had used a search engine to look up their own name only once or twice. In 2009, 78% of self-searchers reported the same limited level of engagement. Just 2% say they use a search engine to look up information about themselves on a regular basis, and 19% say they do so every once in awhile.

Men who follow their digital footprints using search engines do so more often than women. One in four

<sup>8</sup> However, there are many activities tied to reputation monitoring happen on social networking sites and 61% of social networking users visit the sites at least every few days. It is also the case that some internet users hire services like Reputation Defender to conduct their online reputation monitoring for them.

(26%) male self-searchers check on results at least every once in awhile compared with 17% of female self-searchers who do the same. Interestingly, young adults who self-search largely say they have done so only once or twice (84% say this), while older self-searchers are somewhat more engaged. Three in four (75%) self-searchers ages 50-64 have checked up just once or twice, while 25% do so at least every once in awhile.

## **One in five (20%) adult internet users say they have used other websites to look up their name and see what information is available about them online.**

While mainstream search engines are the starting point for nearly every kind of online query, those who monitor their digital footprints also employ site-specific searches on social media sites like Facebook and Flickr. While Google or Bing may cache the latest publicly available blog post that mentions your name, you may need to search elsewhere to see semi-public information that circulates within your personal social network. For the first time, we asked about these other searches, and found that 20% of online adults use other websites and internet services to look up their own name to see what information they find.

However, there is almost complete overlap between those who use those who use general search engines and those who search elsewhere. If you don't use search engines to check up on your digital footprints, you most likely don't check anywhere else. Looking at those who said yes to either question only increases the size of the self-searching group by one percentage point; 58% of adult internet users have searched online for information about themselves—*either* by using a search engine or conducting searches on other sites.

Online men are more likely than online women to search for information about themselves on other sites such as Facebook, Flickr and YouTube (23% vs. 18%). Again, internet users under the age of 50—who are bigger users of social media sites—are more likely than older users to conduct searches on these kinds of sites. One in four users in the under-50 group do so, compared with one in seven in the over-50 group.

## **When people search for themselves, the most prominent results are usually about someone else with the same name.**

As we noted in the first *Digital Footprints* report, people can have very different experiences with online reputation management depending on whether they have a unique name or one shared with others. Likewise, people can become exceptionally visible in the search results connected to their names for a range of reasons—because of the public nature of their job, their contributions to a blog or their personal involvement in a newsworthy event, for good or for ill.

Most who are motivated to look do find some relevant results. Among those who conduct personal name searches, the majority (63%) say they find at least some relevant material connected to their name. By comparison, 35% of self-searchers say their queries do not yield any relevant results.

Indeed, most people enjoy some level of “privacy through obscurity” online. We asked self-searchers about the critical first page of search results that popped up when they queried their name, and how

prominently their own name was in the results. When self-searchers query their name using a search engine, 62% say the first page of results is mostly about someone else with a name very similar or identical to theirs. Just 31% of self-searchers say that most of the results on that critical first page are actually about them.<sup>9</sup>

Those with highly-ranked results could appear in a more prominent position for a variety of reasons, some of which may have to do with their job. Looking at the 31% of self-searchers who say that the first page of search results contains material that is mostly about them, a much higher percentage than average say that they are required by their employer to market themselves online (27% compared with 12% of all employed internet users).

Interestingly, while young adults are more likely to have posted a wide range of personal digital content online, the results connected to their real name are far more likely to be hidden slightly deeper in the haystack. Three in four (74%) self-searching young adults say that the first page of search results for their name primarily contains content about someone else. That compares with 62% of self-searchers ages 30-49, 51% of those ages 50-64 and 48% of those ages 65 and older.

The likelihood that someone will appear prominently in the first page of search results also tracks closely with education, but not income. More than one-third (37%) of self-searchers with a college degree say relevant results about them dominate the first page compared with just 21% of self-searchers with a high school degree or less.

## **Internet users employ a multitude of identities online, and many avoid using their real names.**

While some of the content associated with our names online—such as our address, telephone number or real estate transactions—is made available without our direct participation, we also actively make choices about claiming authorship of the material we voluntarily share online.

Most internet users (54%) now count themselves among these content-contributing masses. They post comments, queries and other information online through blogs, social networking sites and other venues. Among those who have posted this kind of material, 45% say they usually post information using their real name. By comparison, an almost equal number (41%) say they usually post content under a username or screen name that people associate with them. This affords some level of obscurity for content creators because a viewer would have to know a user's screen name in order to associate content with him. Just 8% say they usually post content anonymously.

Female content contributors are more likely than male contributors to say they usually post content online under their real name (49% vs. 41%). Likewise, male contributors are more likely to routinely employ a screen name when posting; 47% of men who post content usually do so with a username compared with 36% of women. However, there are no significant differences between the sexes when it comes to posting content anonymously.

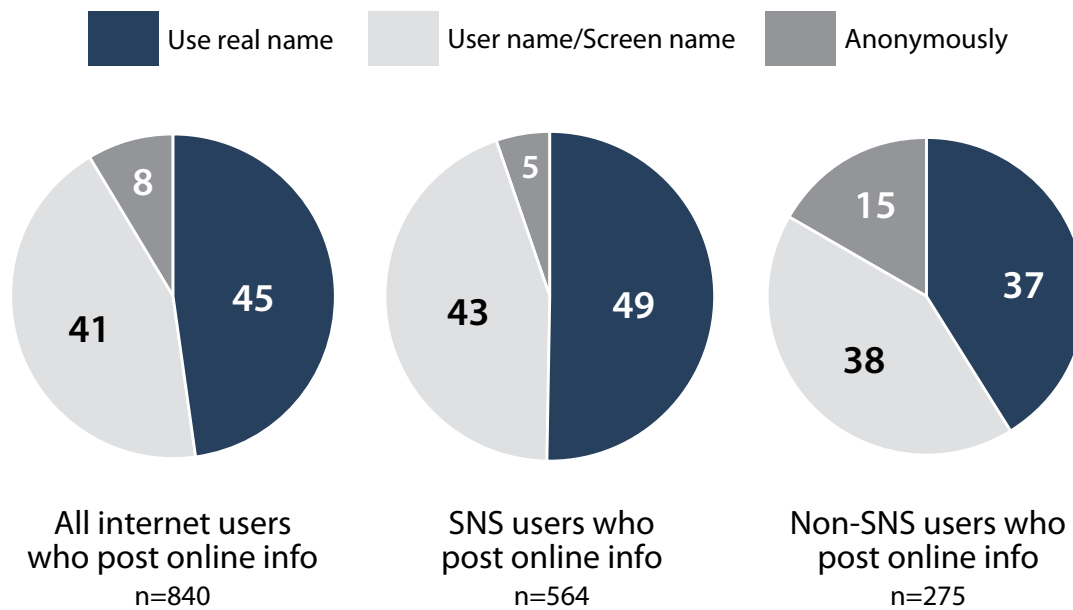
Interestingly, social networking users are significantly more likely than non-users to say that they usually post content online using their real name. Half (49%) of SNS users say they usually share material using their real name, compared with 37% of non-SNS users. Similarly, they are less likely than non-SNS users to say that they typically post content anonymously. Just 5% of SNS users say they usually post comments, queries or other information anonymously, while 15% of non-SNS users report the same.

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<sup>9</sup> In December 2009, after this survey was fielded, Google started personalizing its search results. This would presumably now affect a user's perception of their ranking in the search results. For more detail, see: <http://searchengineland.com/google-now-personalizes-everyones-search-results-31195>

## Multiple identities online

% of each group who post info online using their real name, screen name or anonymously



### One in four employed adults says their company has policies about how they present themselves online.

Employed adults are more likely than in the past to say that they work for a company that has policies about how they present themselves on the internet, such as what they can post on blogs and websites or what information they can share online. One in four (25%) employed adults say their company has a policy like this, up from 20% in December 2006. However, while 67% of employed adults say their workplace does not have such a policy, another 8% say they don't know.

Looking at *employed internet users*, 27% now work for an employer that has policies about how they present themselves online—such as what they can post on blogs and websites or what information they can share about themselves. That compares to 22% who reported the same in 2006.

Those with higher levels of education and income are far more likely to say they are employed in workplaces that have these policies about self-presentation online. One in three (32%) college grads say they work for companies that have rules about how they present themselves on the internet, compared with just 18% of high school grads. Likewise, 29% of employed adults living in households earning \$75,000 or more per year work for companies with such policies, compared with just 18% of those living in households earning less than \$30,000 per year.

### Just over one in ten (12%) employed internet users are “public personae” who say they need to market themselves online as part of their job.

Those who need to make information available about themselves online in order to market themselves for their job make up a unique segment of the internet universe. These “public personae” now make up 12% of the employed adult population, up slightly from the 10% who said they were required to market

themselves online in 2006.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to 2006, employed men are now considerably more likely to be in the position of having to promote themselves online. While 15% of employed men say they have a job that requires them to self-promote online, just 7% of employed women say this. This role of self marketing is also somewhat more common among younger adults; employed adults ages 18-29 are more likely than those ages 50-64 to say they have a job that requires self-promotion online (15% vs. 9%).

However, once again, education stands out as one of the most important indicators. Fully 19% of employed college grads say that they have to market themselves online for their job, compared with just 6% of high school grads.

Public personae stand out in a number of ways when it comes to reputation management online:

- **They are far more active in monitoring search results connected to their names;** 84% of public personae use search engines to check up on their digital footprints, compared with just 55% of other employed internet users. Among those who search for themselves, 44% do so at least every once in awhile, compared with 20% of other employed internet users.
- **They enjoy a higher ranking in search results;** 47% of public personae who self-search say that the first page of results is mostly about them, compared with just 28% of other employed internet users.
- **They are bigger users of social media;** 73% of public personae have created a social networking profile compared with 46% of other employed internet users. Likewise, 36% say they have used Twitter or another service to share updates about themselves, compared with 18% of other employed internet users. And almost one in three (29%) are bloggers, while just 11% of other employed internet users have created or worked on a blog.
- **They are more likely to request the removal of things that others post about them online.** One in five (22%) public personae say they have asked someone to remove information about them that was posted online, including things like photos or videos, while just 6% of other employed internet users have made such a request.

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<sup>10</sup> In 2006 we presented this finding as a percentage of all adult internet users who had a job that required self-marketing online (11% of internet users). However, due to the fluctuations in employment levels since that time, the percentage of all internet users who have this kind of job is now lower (9%) even though the employed population as a whole now includes a higher proportion of people who have such a job.

## What we think others can see about us online

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As in 2006, we asked a battery of questions about the different kinds of personal information that may be available about the respondent online. The introduction to the question reads: “We’d like to know if any of the following information about you is available on the internet for others to see—it doesn’t matter if you posted it yourself or someone else posted it.” Respondents were also given the option to say that they did not know whether a given piece of information was available, and for many questions, respondents expressed a high level of uncertainty. While the affirmative answers paint a portrait of the user’s impression of what is available, they likely do not reflect the full extent to which these pieces of information could be uncovered by a motivated searcher. In addition, some of these items could be available publicly while others may be posted to a restricted profile or website.

### **Among employed internet users, 44% say that details about whom they work for are available online.**

Close to half (44%) of employed internet users now say that details about whom they work for are posted online, up from 35% in 2006. Employed online adults who have higher levels of education and income are more likely than other internet users to say this information is available. For example, 53% of employed internet users with a college degree say that information about whom they work for is available online for others to see, compared with 36% of those with a high school degree.

### **Photos put a face to our digital footprints; 42% of internet users say a photo of them is available online, up from just 23% in 2006.**

As participation in social networking sites has grown, so too has the posting of photos, which is a central element to profile creation. Overall, 42% of internet users say that a photo of them is available on the internet for others to see, which represents a huge increase from the 23% of internet users who said the same in 2006. Among SNS users, fully 71% say that photos of them are available online, compared with just 18% of non-SNS users.

For internet users, the prospect of having a personal photo displayed online decreases sharply with age. Looking at the standard age breaks, 68% of young adult internet users ages 18-29 say that photos of them are available online, compared with 44% of those ages 30-49, 24% of those ages 50-64 and 17% of wired seniors ages 65 and older.

However, among social networking users, the dropoff is much less severe; while 78% of SNS users ages 18-29 say that photos of them are available online for others to see, 65% of SNS users ages 30-49 and 66% of those ages 50 and older say that photos are available online.

Home broadband users are twice as likely as dial-up users to say that photos of them are available online (46% vs. 22%). Likewise, those with wireless internet access are more likely than those without to say that photos of them are posted on the internet for others to see (50% vs. 26%).

### **One in three (33%) internet users say their birth date is available online.**

One in three internet users say their birth date is available online for others to see.<sup>11</sup> However, 50% of young adult internet users say their birth date is posted online, compared with 33% of users ages 30-49

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<sup>11</sup> The 2009 survey was the first time we asked this question, so there is no trend data to compare change over time.

and about one in five users ages 50 and older. This trend may be tied to the inclusion of birth dates on social networking profiles; 51% of SNS users say their birth date is accessible online while just 18% of non-users say their birth date is available.

Likewise, among young adult SNS users, the numbers are even higher; fully 59% of them say that their birth date is available online. By comparison, 46% of SNS users ages 30-49 and 43% of those ages 50 and older say their birth date is posted online.

### **12% of internet users say their cell phone number is available on the internet for others to see, up from 6% in 2006.**

While some people cautiously guard their cell phone number, 12% of internet users say their cell number is posted on the internet for others to see. That segment is twice as large as it was in 2006, when just 6% of internet users said their cell phone number was available online.

Male internet users are more likely than female internet users to say their cell phone number is accessible on the internet (15% vs. 10%). In keeping with the above trends, young adults are also more likely than older users to say that their cell phone number is available online. One in five (20%) report this, compared with 11% of internet users ages 30-49, 9% of those ages 50-64 and 7% of those ages 65 and older.

### **10% of internet users say a video of them is available online, up from only 2% in 2006.**

One in ten internet users now say that video of them is available on the internet for others to see, which represents a five-fold increase since 2006. Unlike with photos, there are significant gender differences when it comes to video. Male internet users are more likely than female internet users to say that video of them is available online (13% vs. 7%).

As is the case with photos, young adults are far more likely than their elders to say that video of them is available online. One in four (25%) internet users ages 18-29 say that video of them is accessible on the internet, compared with just 6% of users ages 30-49 and only 2% of those ages 50 and older.

Among users of social networking sites, 18% say that video of them is available online, compared with just 2% of non-users. Nearly one-third (30%) of SNS users ages 18-29 say that video of them is posted on the internet for others to see, compared with about one in ten SNS users who are older than that.

Home broadband users are more than three times as likely as dial-up users to say that video of them is available online (11% vs. 3%). Similarly, those with wireless internet access are more likely than those without to say that video of them can be found online (13% vs. 3%).

### **Some pieces of information are now less likely than in the past to be reported as available.**

While basic pieces of contact information like a home address and telephone number were among the top items reported to be available online in our 2006 survey, they are now surpassed by employer information and photos.

- 26% of internet users say that their **home address** is available on the internet for others to see, down from 35% who reported this in 2006.
- 21% of internet users say their **home phone number** is available online, down from 30% in 2006.

## A number of items were essentially unchanged since the 2006 survey.

Several pieces of information were just as likely to be reported as available online in 2009 as they were in 2006:

- 31% of internet users say that their **email address** is available online (compared with 32% who said this in 2006).
- 23% say that **things they have written** with their name on it are available for others to see online (compared with 24% who reported this in 2006).
- 22% say that information about the **groups or organizations they belong to** is available online (compared with 23% in 2006).
- 12% say their **political party or affiliation** is available online for others to see (compared with 11% who reported this in 2006).

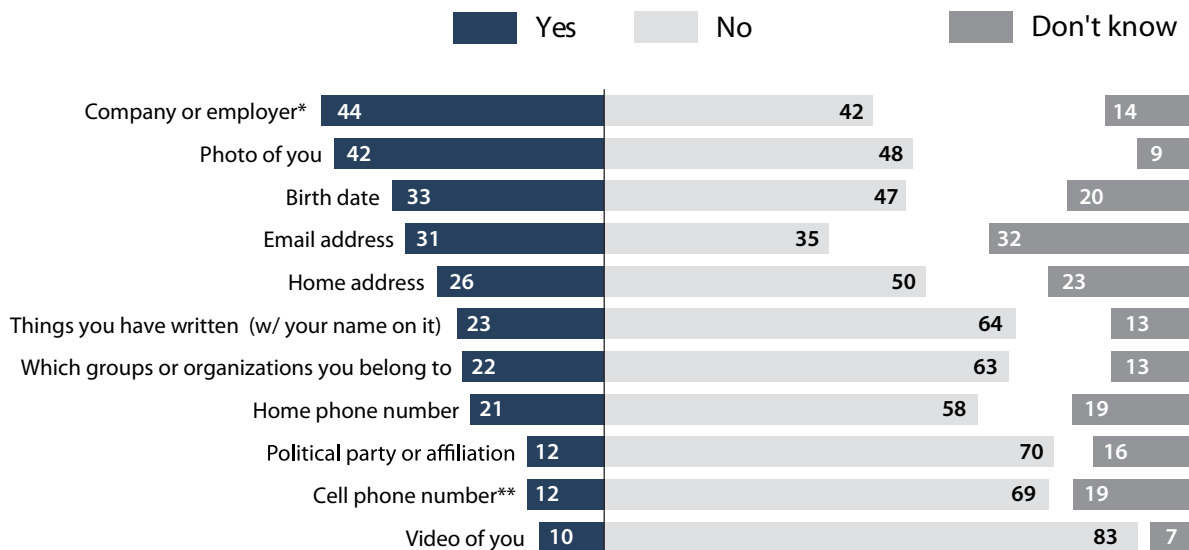
## Many users express uncertainty about the availability of their information online.

A relatively large segment of the internet user population expressed uncertainty about the availability of various pieces of information online. Email addresses—which are often bought and sold and can be compromised by spammers—still evoke the most tentative responses; 32% of internet users say they don't know whether or not their email address is available online for others to see.

A slightly smaller segment—about one in five internet users—say they are unsure whether or not their home address, birth date, home phone number or cell phone number are available online for others to find.

## What we think others can see

Is this available on the internet, or not—or are you not sure? (% of internet users unless otherwise noted)



\* based on employed internet users

\*\* based on internet users who have a cell phone



## Millennials report a much larger digital footprint compared with older generations.

When asked about the array of information that may be available about them online, Millennials (young adults ages 18-32) report a much larger digital footprint when compared with older generations.

Looking across the range of items we queried, internet-using Millennials were much more likely than older cohorts to report that at least five pieces of information were available online for others to see. One in three online Millennials (32%) reported this level of information sharing online, compared with 17% of Gen X, 20% of Trailing Boomers and 15% of Leading Boomers. Among the Silent Generation, 12% said at least five of these items were available, while 13% of the G.I. Generation reported the same.

One of the most notable differences is the extent to which images of the youngest generation—whether photos or videos—are shared online. The number of internet-using Millennials who say that photos of them are available online is more than double that of their parents' generations.

Fully 65% of online adults ages 18-32 say that photos of them are available online for others to see compared with just 30% of Trailing Boomers and 24% of Leading Boomers. The same stark contrast is true of video; 23% of Millennials say that video of them is posted online while just 4% of Trailing Boomers and 2% of Leading Boomers say that videos of them are available for others to see on the internet. Even Generation X lags significantly when compared with the well-documented lives of the Millennials. Less than half (44%) say that photos of them are available, and just 4% say that video of them is online.

## Nearly half of online Millennials say that their birth date is available online for others to see.

While including a birth date has become a standard feature on many social networking profiles, this can also be a critical piece of information used by identity thieves. Birth dates are used by many businesses, including credit grantors, as a password to permit account access or establish new accounts. One recent study by researchers at Carnegie Mellon University found that the acquisition of a birth date, particularly when combined with location information for younger users, can be used to successfully predict social security numbers.<sup>12</sup> And another recent study found that young Millennials, ages 18-24, are at the greatest risk for identity theft because it takes them longer to detect that their information has been stolen.<sup>13</sup>

Among internet-using Millennials, 47% say that their birth date is available online for others to see. That compares with 34% of Gen X internet users, 27% of Trailing Boomers and 22% of Leading Boomers who are online. Another 22% of internet users in the Silent Generation and just 14% of internet users in the G.I. Generation say that their birth date is available online.

Looking at Millennials who are social networking users, 57% say that their birth date is available somewhere online for others to see. However, the survey did not ask specifically about the inclusion of birth dates on social networking profiles.

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12 See: "Predicting Social Security numbers from public data," Alessandro Acquisti and Ralph Gross, *Proceedings of the National Academy of the Sciences*, May 5, 2009. Available at: <http://www.pnas.org/content/106/27/10975.full.pdf%20html?sid=f655da07-5374-4129-afe3-a09ba3f3fe69>

13 See: "18- to 24-year-olds most at risk for ID theft, survey finds," Allison Klein, *The Washington Post*, March 17, 2010. Available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/03/16/AR2010031604209.html>

**While Millennials are more likely than older generations to say that their cell phone number is available online, they are less likely to say that their home address is posted online.**

One in five internet-using Millennials who own a mobile phone (19%) say that their cell phone number is available online for others to see. That compares with about one in ten respondents from each older cohort who reported the same. However, just 18% of online Millennials said that they believed their home address was available online, compared with 31% of Gen Xers, 32% of Trailing Boomers and 28% of Leading Boomers. Among internet users in the Silent Generation, 34% said that their home address was posted online for others to see. *(continued on the next page...)*

## Generational Footprints

% of internet users in each age group who say the following is available about them online

	Total	Gen Y (Millennials) [18-32]	Gen X [33-44]	Trailing Boomers [45-54]	Leading Boomers [55-63]	Silent Gen [64-72]	G.I. Gen [73-97]
Company or employer [based on employed internet users]	44	42	43	48	43	n/a*	n/a*
Photo of you	42	65	44	30	24	17	15
Birth date	33	47	34	27	22	22	14
Email address	31	36	25	31	31	36	36
Home address	26	18	31	32	28	34	24
Things you have written that have your name on it	23	31	21	18	19	15	16
Which groups or organizations you belong to	22	29	18	21	20	18	14
Home phone number	21	15	20	27	25	26	22
Political party or affiliation	12	16	11	10	8	9	19
Cell phone number [based on internet users who have a cell phone]	12	19	10	10	8	9	n/a*
Video of you	10	23	4	4	2	1	4
<b>Five or more items available</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>

\*The number of employed internet users in these age groups was too small to report results.  
Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Survey, August 18-September 14, 2009. Margin of error is plus or minus 3 percentage points for results based on total internet users [n=1,698].

## Those who are more visible online are more likely to be contacted by someone from their past.

By several different measures, internet users who are more visible online are more likely to say that they have been contacted by someone from their past who found them through the internet. Overall, 40% of all adult internet users have been contacted online by people from their past, up from just 20% in 2006.

Looking across all of the pieces of information we asked internet users about—from the availability of their email address to information such as their birth date—we created a count variable that allowed us to compare people according to the amount of information they reported as available online for others to see. Internet users who say that a large amount of information is available about them online (those who reported 5-11 items being available) were more likely than every other group to say that they had been contacted by someone from their past who found them through the internet. We looked at four groups according to their varying levels of visibility online:

- 66% of internet users who reported that a lot of information (5-11 items) was available about them online said they had been contacted by someone from their past.
- 53% of internet users who reported that some information (3-4 items) was available about them said they had been contacted by someone from their past.
- 32% of internet users who reported that only a little information (1-2 items) was available about them said they were contacted.
- 15% of those who said none of the items we asked about were available online still said that they were contacted by someone from their past who found them through the internet.

## Social media users receive more contact from past connections.

Internet users who maintain profiles on social networking sites are almost four times as likely as non-SNS users to say they have been contacted by someone from their past (67% vs. 18%). Likewise, users of status update services like Twitter are far more likely to be contacted (65% vs. 34%), as are online daters (64% vs. 38%).

Interestingly, online men are more likely than online women to say they have been contacted (43% vs. 38%). And users under the age of 50—particularly young adults ages 18-29—are the most likely to report being contacted by someone from their past:

- 55% of internet users ages 18-29 say they have been contacted, compared with:
- 46% of internet users ages 30-49,
- 25% of internet users ages 50-64, and
- 20% of internet users ages 65 and older.

Looking at age variations *among social networking users*, the differences for those under age 50 disappear:

- 68% of social networking users ages 18-29 have been contacted by someone from their past, compared with:
- 69% of SNS users ages 30-49, and
- 56% of SNS users ages 50 and older.

While these figures do not establish a causal relationship between social networking site usage and receiving contact from past connections, it is clear that more of this activity is happening among people who maintain profiles on social networking sites than among those who do not.

## Part 2: Concerns about the availability of personal information

### Attitudes and Actions

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#### Over time, users have become less likely to express concern about the amount of information available about them online.<sup>14</sup>

To even the most casual news observer, the stream of stories documenting commercial and government data breaches, employers Googling job candidates and celebrities committing Twitter faux pas may make it seem as though there are more reasons than ever to worry about the amount of information connected to people's names online. And given that users have become more aware of their digital footprints over the years, one might expect that concerns over the availability of this information have grown. Yet, over time, adult internet users have actually become less likely to express concern about the size of their digital footprints:

- 33% of internet users say they worry about how much information is available about them online, down from 40% in December 2006.<sup>15</sup>
- These decreased levels of concern are fairly uniform across demographic groups—no group saw an increase on this metric over the last three years.

And while there are few differences on this question with respect to income, education, race or gender, age remains an important predictor of concern. Among age groups, internet users ages 30-49 are the most likely to worry about the amount of information available online: 38% say they are concerned, compared with 30% of users ages 18-29, 31% of those ages 50-64 and 23% of those 65 and older.

However, it is important to note that the results from this question are not a measure of internet users' overall views on "privacy" or the extent to which they wish to have control over their personal information online. A relative lack of concern about the availability of personal information online does not necessarily translate into inaction. Indeed, many of the least concerned internet users have still taken steps to restrict what they share with others.

For example, two-thirds of all SNS users (65%) say they have changed the privacy settings for their profile to limit what they share with others online. Among SNS users who worry about the availability of their online information, fully 77% have changed their privacy settings. However, even those who don't worry about such information are relatively active in this regard—59% of these less concerned SNS users have adjusted their privacy settings in this way.

It's also the case that very few internet users have experienced reputational missteps online, which may contribute to their relatively low levels of concern. Only 4% internet users report having bad experiences

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14 As is noted elsewhere in this report, this survey was fielded before Facebook announced the most recent and controversial changes to its default privacy settings.

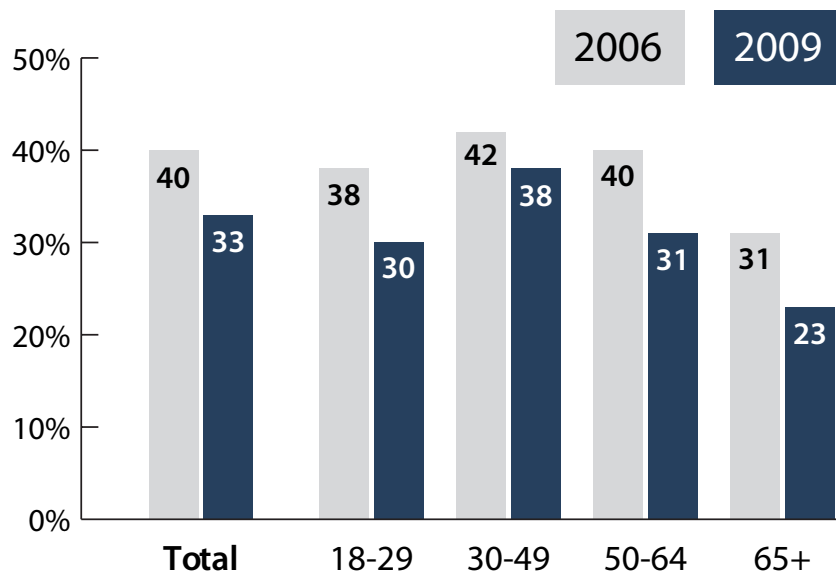
15 The question used in the September 2009 survey question read, "Do you ever worry about how much information is available about you on the internet, or is that not something you really worry about?" The December 2006 survey question read, "Do you ever worry about how much information is available about you online, or is that not something you really worry about?" This is a minor change that does not affect the ability to make trend comparisons.

because embarrassing or inaccurate information was posted about them online (unchanged since 2006). Even among the highly visible “public personae” population that is required to self-promote online, just 6% report a bad experience due to embarrassing or inaccurate information being posted online.

Likewise, just 8% of all adult internet users have asked that information that was posted about them online be removed, which is virtually unchanged from the 6% of internet users who reported these requests in 2006. And for the first time, we asked social networking users about their own role in sharing undesirable material; just 12% of social networking users say they have posted updates, comments, photos or videos that they later regret sharing.

## Concerns over personal information

% of internet users in each age group who say they worry about how much information is available online about them, over time



### Young adults are still more likely than older users to say they limit the amount of information available about them online.

The percentage of internet users who take steps to limit the information available about them on the internet has also declined, albeit by a slightly smaller margin. One-third (33%) of internet users take steps to limit the amount of information available about them online, down from 38% of such users in December 2006.<sup>16</sup> Young internet users (those ages 18-29) remain the most likely group to limit the information available about them online—45% did this in December 2006, and 44% do so now.

When compared with other age groups, young adults are the only group that remains just as likely to limit their online information as they were in 2006. Older age groups are not only less likely than young adults to say that they limit their information, but they have become less likely to do so over time. In the

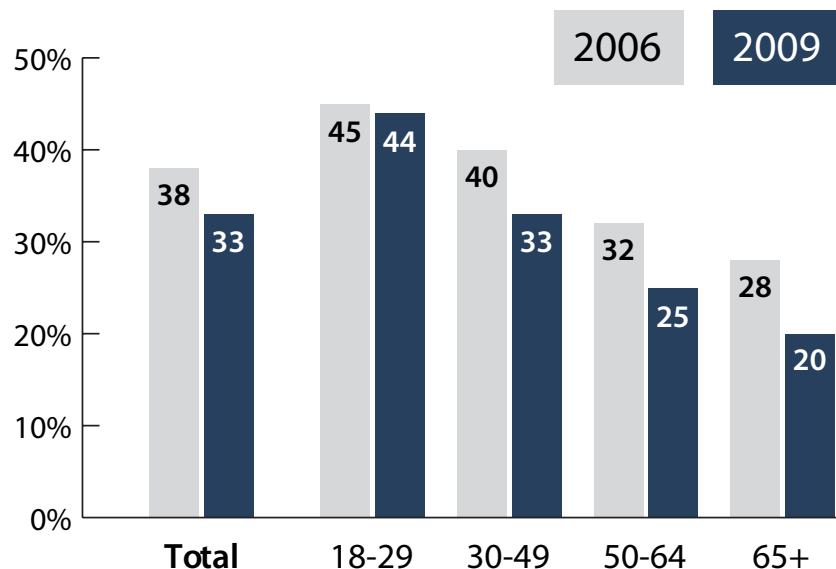
<sup>16</sup> The question used in the September 2009 survey question read, “Do you ever take steps to try to limit the amount of information that’s available about you on the internet, or is that not something you ever do?” The December 2006 survey question read, “Do you ever take steps to try to limit the amount of information that’s available about you online, or is that not something you ever do?” As noted above, this is also a minor change that does not affect the ability to make trend comparisons.

latest survey, 33% of 30-49 year olds, 25% of 50-64 year olds and 20% of those 65 and older said they take steps to limit their information online. That compares to 40% of 30-49 year olds, 32% of 50-64 year olds and 28% of those 65 and older who said they take steps to limit their information in 2006.

There are few differences on this question with respect to income, education, race or gender. Likewise, the only difference relating to geography is the finding that suburban internet users (35%) are a marginally more likely to say they take steps to limit the amount of information available about them when compared with rural users (26% of whom do so).

## Limiting personal information

% of internet users in each age group who take steps to limit the amount of information available online about them



### Wireless and broadband users are no more concerned, but are more likely to limit the amount of information available about them online.

Interestingly, while both wireless and broadband users are more likely to take steps to limit their personal information they are no more likely than other internet users to be worried about how much information is available about them online. Some 36% of home broadband users take steps to limit their personal information (compared with 24% of dialup users), while 35% of wireless users limit their personal information (compared with 27% of stationary internet users).

### Those who know more, worry more.

Worries about the availability of personal information and taking steps to limit that information are tightly linked with the amount of searching (both personal searches and searches about others) one takes part in. In our 2006 survey, those who searched their own name were just as likely to worry about how much information is available about them online as were those who did not self-search.<sup>17</sup> Now,

17 Other research has indicated a similar relationship between increased awareness and concern. See, for instance: Oscar H. Gandy, Jr. "The role of theory in the policy process. A response to Professor Westin." pp. 99-106 in C. Firestone and J. Sche-

those who self-search are significantly more likely than those who do not search to worry about their online footprints (37% vs. 27%).

Yet, self-searchers have not become any more likely to express concern as time has progressed. In 2006, 40% of self-searchers said they were worried about the amount of information available about them online, and 37% reported the same in 2009. The overall drop in those who say they worry about the amount of information available about them on the internet is primarily among those who have never used a search engine to look up their own names online. Chances are, if you haven't bothered to Google your name by now, you don't spend much time fretting about your digital footprints.

### **And those who express concern are twice as likely to say they take steps to limit the amount of information available about them online.**

Those who express concern about the amount of information available about them online are far more likely to take steps to limit access to that material; 53% of those who worry also take steps to limit, compared with just 23% of internet users who do not express concern. This finding is unchanged since 2006 when 54% of those who were worried said they took steps to limit access to information about them.

However, concern about and limitation of information do not always go hand in hand. Among internet users who say they worry about how much information is available about them online, 45% say they do not take steps to limit the amount of information accessible to others online.

### **The most visible and engaged internet users are also most active in limiting the information connected to their names online.**

At first glance, this finding seems to suggest an inherent contradiction. Wouldn't those who are less visible online be the ones doing the most to limit their information? However, analysis of multiple questions on our survey implies quite the opposite. Those who are the most engaged online have more material to manage and therefore need to be more proactive in limiting that information—whether that means changing the default privacy settings on a social networking profile or requesting that inaccurate information be removed from a website.

The more active people are in searching for results connected to their names online, the more likely they are to take steps to limit that information: Internet users who search for their own name are more likely to limit the information available about them online than those who do not (39% vs. 24%).

Those who report the most information being available about them online are also the most likely to say they take steps to limit what is accessible: Those who report the widest range of information being available about them (at least 5 of the 11 items we asked about) are considerably more likely to say they take steps to limit their information than are those who report only 1 or 2 items being available (43% vs. 30%).

### **The more you see footprints left by others, the more likely you are to limit your own.**

Those who search for information about others are more than twice as likely as non-searchers to limit

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ment (Eds.). *Toward an Information Bill of Rights and Responsibilities*, 1995. "...I discovered that the extent to which people had read or heard about the "potential use or misuse of computerized information about consumers" was a powerful explanatory factor. The more they had heard or read, the more they were concerned about threats to their privacy, the more concerned they were about the sale of personal information by the list industry."



their personal information than those who do not (39% vs. 17%). And the more often a user searches for information about others, the more likely she is to limit access to her own personal information. Among people searchers who say they look for information about others at least every once in a while, 46% say they take steps to limit the amount of content accessible about themselves online. That compares with just 33% of those who have searched for information about others only once or twice.

### **Social networking users are no more concerned, but are more likely to limit the amount of information accessible to others online.**

Social network users are no more or less likely than non-users to worry about the availability of information about them online (32% for SNS users, 34% for non-users). However, profile owners are consistently more likely to take steps to limit their personal information (41% do this, vs. 26% of non-users).

The gap between SNS users and non-users has actually decreased significantly since 2006 when it comes to limiting personal information online. In 2006, the difference between users and non-users on this question was 23 percentage points (57% vs. 34%); now the gap is 15 points. In other words, compared with the general online population, users of online social networks are now less likely to limit their personal information online than they were three years ago.

### **Those who take steps to limit the information about them online are less likely to post comments online using their real name.**

Those who worry about how much information is available about them online are roughly as likely to post comments, queries and other information online (using a real name, a screen name, or anonymously) as those who do not worry about their personal information—57% vs. 52%.

However, those who take steps to limit their personal information are much more likely to post online—69% of these internet users have posted something online, compared with 47% of those who do not take steps to limit their personal information. And within the universe of content posters, those who take steps to limit their personal information are generally less likely to use their real names (40% usually do so, compared with 49% of posters who do not take steps to limit their personal info) and more likely to use a screen name (46% vs. 38%). Content posters who limit their personal information and those who do not are equally likely to post anonymously (10% vs. 7%).

### **If your boss is watching, you're more likely to be watching, too.**

As noted above, overall, 12% of employed adults say need to market themselves online as part of their job. These public personae who are required to self promote online are more proactive in monitoring their online identities than those who do not have this kind of professional obligation.

Fully 84% of those who say they need to post information about themselves online as part of their job use a search engine to look up their own name, which is up significantly from 68% in 2006. Among other employed internet users who are not required to market themselves online, just 55% use search engines to find results connected to their name.

Again, as in 2006, public personae are more active in monitoring and managing their digital footprint; 44% of those who follow their footprints via search engines say they do so at least every once in a while. Among other employed internet users, only 20% do so with the same level of frequency.

The greater level of vigilance among public personae is also illustrated by a greater likelihood to limit the amount of information available about them. Four in ten (42%) of these “public personae” say they take

steps to limit their personal information compared with 32% of other employed internet users. However, public personae are no more likely to worry about the amount of information accessible about them online.

However, those whose workplaces have explicit policies about employees' presence online do express slightly higher levels of concern; 41% of those who work for a company with a policy about how employees should present themselves online worry about the information that is available about them (vs. 29% of those whose companies do not have such policies). The difference in limiting behavior is slightly less pronounced; 39% of those with company policies about self-presentation online take steps to limit their personal information compared with 31% of employees whose companies do not have such policies.

## Negative experiences and damage control

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### Just 4% of internet users report bad experiences because of embarrassing or inaccurate information online.

High levels of confidence among internet users may, in part, be connected to personal experience. As was the case in 2006, the 2009 survey found that just 4% of adult internet users have had bad experiences because embarrassing or inaccurate information was posted about them online.

Young adult internet users (18-29) are more likely than online adults ages 50 and older to report bad experiences of this kind; 7% of young adults say they have had negative experiences because of embarrassing or inaccurate information being posted about them, compared with just 2% of adults ages 50 and older.

Those who worry about the amount of information available about them online are also somewhat more likely to report bad experiences (7% vs. 3% of those who do not worry). However, more than any other group, the 8% of internet users who have used online dating websites are the most likely to say they have had bad experiences. Fully 14% of online daters say they have had negative experiences because of embarrassing or inaccurate information posted online, compared with just 4% of those who do not use online dating sites.

Those who worry about or limit their personal information online are more likely than those who do not to have had a bad experience online due to someone posting their personal information, although not by an overwhelming margin. Some 7% of internet users who worry about their personal information online have had a bad experience, vs. 3% of those who do not worry about their personal info. Similarly, 8% of those who take steps to limit their personal information have had a bad experience, compared with 3% of those who do not take steps to limit their online footprint.

### Close to one in ten internet users (8%) have asked someone to remove information about them that was posted online.

Internet users are twice as likely to say they have asked someone to remove information about them as they are to say they have had a bad experience due to embarrassing or inaccurate information being shared. Among all adult internet users, 8% say they have asked someone to remove information about them that was posted on the internet, including things like photos or videos. By comparison, about the same number (6%) reported this in 2006.

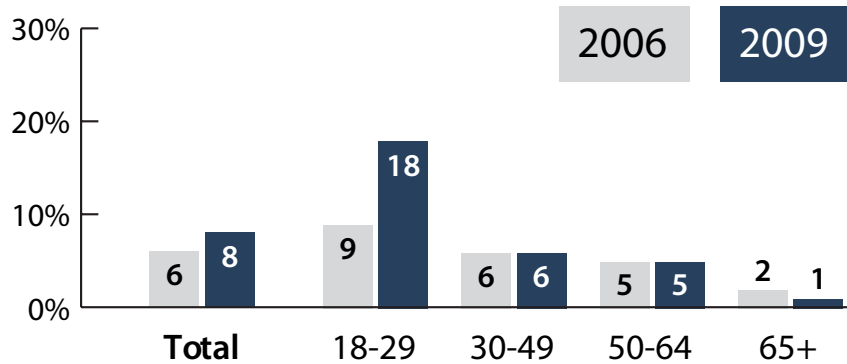
However, young adults are the *only* age group that has become significantly more likely since 2006 to say they have requested an information takedown. Close to one in five (18%) young adult internet users ages 18-29 say they have asked someone to remove information about them that was posted online, up from 9% in 2006. That compares to just 6% of users ages 30-49, 5% of those ages 50-64 and just 1% of those ages 65 and older who said they had requested an information takedown in the current survey (see chart below for comparisons to 2006).

These age-related variations hold true among the social networking population as well. As we noted in our *Social Media and Young Adults* report, 46% of adult internet users say they have created a profile online that others can see on a social networking site like MySpace, Facebook and LinkedIn.

Overall, 13% of SNS users have requested an information takedown, but 20% of SNS users ages 18-29 have made such a request. By comparison, 8% of SNS users ages 30-49 have asked someone to remove information about them and 9% of SNS users ages 50 and older have done this.

## Revising their results

% of internet users in each age group who have ever asked someone to remove information about them that was posted on the internet, including things like photos or videos



Those who worry about their personal information or take steps to limit the content that is available about them online are more likely to say that they have asked others to take down information about them. Among those who worry about the amount of personal information available about them online, 13% have asked someone to take down something they posted (vs. 6% of those who do not worry); similarly, 16% of those who take steps to limit their personal information have asked others to take down information about them (compared with 4% of non-limiters who have done this).

### The vast majority of internet users who have requested a takedown were trying to get a photo or video removed. And most who sought removal of material were successful.

When asked what kind of material they were trying to get removed from the internet, 76% of those who have requested such a takedown said that item was a photo or video. More than one in three (37%) said they had requested that some kind of written material, such as a comment or blog posting, be removed, and 14% said they had asked for some other kind of content to be taken down.<sup>18</sup>

The vast majority of those who have requested that some kind of information about them be taken offline say that their efforts are usually effective. Fully 82% report this, compared with 17% who say they are not usually successful at getting information about them removed.

The number of people who have requested an information takedown is too small to make any meaningful comparisons of success rates across age groups or socioeconomic status.

18 These figures add up to more than 100% because this question allowed for multiple responses.

## Managing identity through social media

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### **Among users of social networking sites, young adults are the most proactive in customizing their privacy settings and restricting who can see certain updates.**

Younger internet users are often associated with the idea that they prefer to share information rather than protect their privacy online. However, our data suggest that younger users are far more active and deliberate curators of their online profiles when compared with older users--perhaps out of necessity. Nearly three-quarters (71%) of social networking users ages 18-29 have changed the privacy settings on their profile to limit what they share with others online. By comparison, 62% of SNS users ages 30-49 and just 55% of SNS users ages 50-64 have changed the default settings. Overall, 65% of adult SNS users say they have customized the privacy settings on their profile to restrict what they share.

Likewise, half of all SNS users (52%) say they have restricted what they share by keeping some people from seeing certain updates. This could include creating custom friend lists or blocking individual users from seeing certain updates or content. For this question, there was less variation among those under age 50. While 58% of SNS users ages 18-29 keep some people from seeing certain updates, 52% of those ages 30-49 do this, compared with 37% of SNS users ages 50-64.

## Social networking users are curators of content

% of social network site users in each age group who have ever taken the following actions

	All SNS users	Age group		
		18-29	30-49	50+
Change the privacy settings for your profile to limit what you share with others online	65	71	62	52
Delete people from your network or friends list	56	64	52	42
Keep some people from seeing certain updates	52	58	52	36
Filter updates posted by some of your friends	41	44	43	27
Delete comments that others have made on your profile	36	47	29	24
Remove your name from photos that have been tagged to identify you	30	41	24	16
Post updates, comments, photos or videos that you later regret sharing	12	19	9	4

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Survey, August 18-September 14, 2009. Margin of error is plus or minus 4 percentage points for results based on adult social network site users [n=680].



### Yet, young adults are by far the most likely to say that they have posted content to social networking sites that they later regret sharing.

Looking at the adult social networking population as a whole, relatively few users (12%) say they have posted updates, comments, photos or videos to the sites that they later regret sharing. However, among SNS users ages 18-29, that number jumps to 19%, while just 9% of those ages 30-49 and only 5% of those ages 50-64 say they have had this experience.

When asked if they ever tried to remove any of the information that they regretted sharing, about eight in ten of these remorseful users said they had attempted to take that content down.

### Young adults are also the most likely to delete unwanted comments and tags associated with their profiles.

Managing an online identity requires more than just making good decisions about the material you share and who you share it with. It also requires monitoring and refining the content that others post about you. Among social networking users, more than a third (36%) say they have deleted comments that others have made on their profiles. Again, young adults are far more engaged in this regard. Half (47%) of

young adult SNS users have deleted comments that others have made on their profile, compared with just 29% of SNS users ages 30-49 and 26% of those ages 50-64.

Similarly, 41% of SNS users ages 18-29 say they have removed their name from photos that were tagged to identify them, compared with just 24% of SNS users ages 30-49 and only 18% of those ages 50-64. Overall, 30% of adult SNS users say they have removed tags that identified them in photos.

## **More than half of social networking users (56%) have “unfriended” others in their network.**

In 2009, the term “unfriend” was chosen as the Oxford Word of the Year and defined as the action of removing someone as a ‘friend’ on a social networking site such as Facebook. While “friending” someone on a social networking site assumes a certain level of persistence in that connection, relationships in the offline world are dynamic and may go through periods of dormancy or end altogether. Indeed, 56% of social networking users say they have deleted people from their network or friends list.

Once again, young adults are the most experienced in this form of management of their social network: 64% of SNS users ages 18-29 have deleted people from their network or friends list, compared with 52% of those ages 30-49 and just 41% of users ages 50-64.

## **Just because we’re friends doesn’t mean I’m listening: 41% of social networking users say they filter updates posted by some of their friends.**

While some friends get deleted from others’ networks, others are simply tuned out. Features such as the “Hide” function on Facebook facilitate this kind of filtering, essentially omitting certain friends’ updates from a user’s News Feed. Overall, 41% of social networking users say they have filtered updates posted by some of their friends.

SNS users ages 18-29 are equally as likely as those ages 30-49 to say that they filter updates from their friends (44% vs. 43%). However, SNS users ages 50-64 are significantly less likely to utilize this feature (30% say they filter).

## **Young adult users of social networking sites report the lowest levels of trust in them.**

Young adult users of social networking applications are not only the most proactive in customizing their privacy settings and limiting what they share via their profiles, but they are also generally less trusting than older users of the sites that host their content. When asked how much of the time they think they can trust social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn, 28% of SNS users ages 18-29 say “never.” By comparison, a smaller segment of older users express such cautious views; 19% of SNS users ages 30-49 and 14% of those ages 50-64 say they never trust the sites.

While younger generations have historically been associated with lower levels of trust overall, those ages 18-29 were not any more likely than older adults to express low levels of trust in this survey.<sup>19</sup> The responses to this question are also significant when seen within the context of the social networking site

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<sup>19</sup> Among all adults, when asked a general question about trust in people (“Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?”), 61% of adults ages 18-29 said “you can’t be too careful,” compared with 58% of adults ages 50 and older. Among those ages 30-49, 66% said you “can’t be too careful,” which is significantly higher than the response from adults ages 50 and older, but not significantly higher than the response from young adults ages 18-29.

user population as a whole.<sup>20</sup> Among SNS users, when asked a general question about trust in people (“Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?”)—there are not significant variations in levels of trust by age. For instance, 57% of SNS users ages 18-29 say “you can’t be too careful” in dealing with people, compared with 58% of SNS users ages 30-49. Among social networking users ages 50 and older, 50% express this cautious view (a difference that is not significant when compared with younger users).

Likewise, young adult SNS users are no less trusting of an array of other organizations, and are actually *more* trusting of news websites when compared with older SNS users. While 42% of SNS users ages 18-29 say you can “just about always” or “most of the time” trust news websites, only 32% of SNS users ages 50 and older express the same level of confidence. When asked about their levels of trust in other kinds of organizations—including large corporations, newspapers and television news, financial companies and websites that provide health information—young adult SNS users express views that are not significantly different than their elder SNS-using counterparts.

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20 For more detail on young adults and measures of social trust, see “Americans and Social Trust: Who, Where and Why.” Available at: <http://pewsocialtrends.org/pubs/414/americans-and-social-trust-who-where-and-why>



## Young adults are the least trusting of SNS

How much of the time do you think you can trust the following? (% of social network site users by age)

	Just about always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
<b>Large corporations</b>				
SNS users 18-29	2	22	56	17
30-49	3	20	62*	13
50+	1	23	49	25*
<b>Newspapers and television news</b>				
SNS users 18-29	9	36	46	6
30-49	6	39	47	6
50+	4	37	50	8
<b>Financial companies such as banks, insurance companies and stock brokers</b>				
SNS users 18-29	7	33	49	11
30-49	4	32	48	15
50+	4	27	51	17
<b>News websites</b>				
SNS users 18-29	11*	31	52	4
30-49	5	33	53	7
50+	4	28	58	7
<b>Social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn</b>				
SNS users 18-29	2	19	51	28*
30-49	3	21	54	19
50+	-	19	57	18
<b>Websites that provide health information</b>				
SNS users 18-29	5	36	45	6
30-49	3	34	51*	6
50+	6	38	37	8

\* indicates a statistically significant difference between age groups.

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Survey, August 18-September 14, 2009. Margin of error is plus or minus 2 percentage points for results based on all adults [n=2,253]. For smaller subgroups, the margin of error may be larger. Please see the Methodology section for details.

## Part 3: Searching, Following and Friending: How users monitor other people's digital footprints online

### Searching for others

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#### **Seven in ten online adults have searched online for information about other people.**

While users have become more curious about our own digital footprints over time, they have also become more likely to search for information about a range of other people in their lives. When asked about eight different groups of people they may encounter in everyday life, 69% of online adults had searched for information about others in at least one of these various groups. As a general rule, internet users under the age of 50 are more likely than older internet users to have sought information about other people in their lives. Three in four internet users under age 50 have searched for information about at least one of these groups, compared with 64% of online adults ages 50-64 and 53% of those ages 65 and older.

Another trend that is consistent across every one of these questions is that social networking users are far more likely than non-users to say they search for information about others in their lives. Overall, 84% of SNS users have searched online for information about at least one of the groups we asked about compared with 56% of non-SNS users. Likewise, those with more tech assets—such as broadband access at home, wireless connectivity or multiple internet-connected devices—are more likely than other internet users to search online for information about the people in their lives.

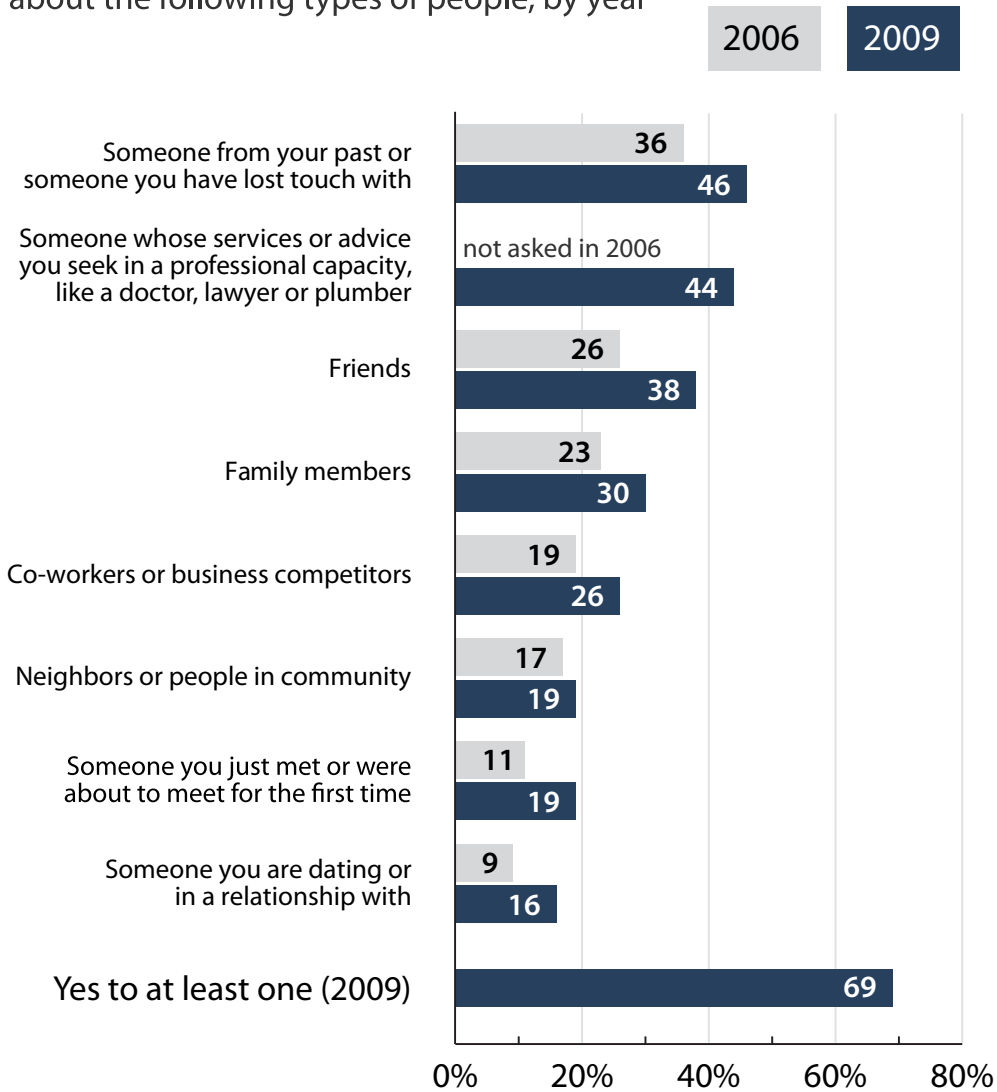
#### **Few searchers say they seek out online information about others on a regular basis, and most have done so only once or twice.**

Among the 69% of internet users who have searched for information about people in their lives, very few make a regular habit of it. Just 5% of these seekers of others say they search for information about other people on a regular basis, while 53% say they have done so only once or twice. Another 39% say they search for information about people “every once in a while.”

There is not great variation according to age in the frequency of searching, though young adults are somewhat more likely than older adults to say they search either on a regular basis or every once in a while.

# Who we search for

% of internet users who have ever searched online to find information about the following types of people, by year



**Reconnecting and rekindling: Nearly half of online adults (46%) have searched for information about someone from their past or someone they have lost touch with.**

As was the case in 2006, people with whom we have lost touch are the most commonly sought-after group. While 36% of internet users had searched for information about someone from their past in 2006, now 46% say they have done this. Re-establishing connections and gathering information about people we have lost touch with is a hallmark of people search in the digital age. In a similar question, we asked respondents if they had ever personally been contacted by someone from their past, and 40% say yes (up from just 20% in 2006).

Among those users who have been contacted by someone from their past, most are also taking steps to revive connections themselves; 73% say they have personally sought out information about someone from their past.

These groups stand out as significantly more likely to seek information about people with whom they have lost touch:

- **Younger internet users** - 53% of internet users under age 50 have sought information about someone from their past compared with just 36% of those over age 50.
- **College grads** – 55% of internet users with a college degree seek out information about those they have lost touch with online compared with 35% of those with a high school degree.
- **Parents** – 51% of parents search for information about those with whom they have lost touch, compared with 44% of non-parents.
- **Broadband users** – 50% of internet users with broadband at home search for information about people from their past, compared with 28% of dial-up users.
- **Wireless users** – 52% of wireless internet users search for information about past connections, compared with 34% of non-wireless users.
- **SNS users** – 64% of social networking users have searched for information about someone from their past, compared with 30% of non-users.

### **Online reputation matters: 44% of online adults have searched for information about someone whose services or advice they seek in a professional capacity.**

Increasingly, the internet is being used as a point of reference not only for the people we know or used to know in our lives, but also for those with whom users may be interacting in the future. In the business world, where people seek out services from competing people and companies with whom they have had no prior interaction, a positive online recommendation or a negative review can be a crucial deciding factor for a potential client. In all, 44% of online adults say they have searched online for information about someone whose services or advice they seek in a professional capacity, like a doctor, lawyer or plumber.<sup>21</sup>

There is not great variation for this activity across age groups, although internet users age 65 and older are considerably less likely to use the internet for this kind of search. While 49% of internet users ages 30-49 have searched online for information about someone whose services or advice they were seeking, just 23% of internet users ages 65 and older have done this. However, the following groups display a greater tendency to research those whose services they seek:

- **College grads** - 58% of those with a college degree have sought information online about someone whose services or advice they were seeking, compared with 29% of high school grads.
- **Higher income groups** – Among internet users living in households earning \$75,000 or more per year, 58% have sought info about someone who would provide professional services, compared with just 34% of those living in households earning \$30,000 or less.
- **White internet users** – Whites are more likely than Hispanic internet users to have researched someone whose services they seek (46% vs. 31%).
- **Parents** - 49% of parents search for information about those whose services they seek, compared with 40% of non-parents.

<sup>21</sup> This was the first time we asked this question, so there is no comparable data from 2006.

- **Broadband users** – 49% of internet users with broadband at home have searched for information about someone whose services or advice they were seeking, compared with 21% of dial-up users.
- **Wireless users** – 50% of wireless internet users have done online research about those whose services they seek, compared with just 30% of non-wireless users.
- **SNS users** – 56% of social networking users have searched for information about someone whose services they seek, compared with 33% of non-users.

### **Social background checks are growing in popularity, but are not yet the norm: 38% of internet users have searched online to find information about their friends.**

Over time, internet users have become significantly more likely to search online for information about their friends. Well over a third (38%) now say they do so, up from just 26% in 2006. The propensity to search for information about friends is closely linked to age:

- **Young adults** - 53% of young adult internet users ages 18-29 search for information about their friends, while 42% of those ages 30-49 do so. Likewise, only 28% of internet users ages 50-64 search for their friends' digital footprints, compared with just 18% of those ages 65 and older.
- **Broadband users** – Internet users with broadband at home are twice as likely as dial-up users to search for information about their friends online (42% vs. 21%).
- **Wireless users** – Internet users with wireless access are also twice as likely as non-wireless users to search for information about friends online (45% vs. 24%).
- **SNS users** – 58% of social networking users have sought information about their friends online, compared with 22% of non-users.

### **Curious about our kin: Nearly one in three (30%) internet users have searched for information about their family members online.**

Searches for family members have also grown over time, such that 30% of internet users now say they have searched for information about people in their family, up from 23% in 2006. Many of the same tendencies that apply for friend searchers also apply to those that seek out information about their family, though the differences are not as stark:

- **Young adults** - 34% of young adult internet users ages 18-29 search for information about their family members, compared with 32% of those ages 30-49. However, only 25% of internet users ages 50-64 seek out information about their family members, which is the same incidence (24%) among those ages 65 and older.
- **White internet users** – 31% of white internet users have searched for information about people in their family online, compared with just 22% of Hispanic internet users.
- **Broadband users** – Among internet users with high-speed access at home, 32% search for information about their family members online, compared with 21% of dial-up users.
- **Wireless users** – 34% of wireless internet users search for information about their family members online, compared with 20% of non-wireless internet users.
- **SNS users** – 40% of social networking users have sought information about their family members online, compared with 20% of non-users.

## Digital footprints at work: One in four (26%) internet users have searched for information about co-workers, professional colleagues or business competitors online.

Internet users are now more likely to say that they have sought information about their co-workers, colleagues or business competitors online; 26% now report this, up from 19% in 2006. Looking specifically at *employed* internet users, 31% have searched online for information about co-workers, professional colleagues or business competitors, up from 23% in 2006. Unlike the other groups we asked about, there are significant differences in the responses to this question according to gender, and the age differences among internet users under the age of 65 are modest. The figures below refer to subgroups of all internet users:

- **Men** – Male internet users are considerably more likely than female internet users to check up on the digital footprints of their co-workers, colleagues and competitors (31% vs. 21%).
- **College grads** – Those with a college degree are more than three times as likely as those with a high school degree to seek out information about work colleagues and competitors (42% vs. 13%).
- **Higher income groups** – 35% of internet users living in households earning \$75,000 or more per year search for the digital footprints of their co-workers and competitors, compared with just 19% of those with a household income of \$30,000 or less.
- **Broadband users** – 29% of internet users with broadband at home have searched for information about their co-workers and business competitors, compared with just 12% of dial-up users.
- **Wireless users** – 31% of wireless internet users have searched for information about colleagues and competitors, while only 15% of non-wireless users have done so.
- **SNS users** – 36% of social networking users say they have sought information about their colleagues and competitors, compared with 17% of non-SNS users.

## Nosy neighbors or just well-informed? One in five (19%) internet users say they have searched online for information about neighbors and people in their community.

While the sources for seeking out information about our neighbors have grown, including neighborhood listservs, sites like RottenNeighbor.com and more easily accessible information about sex offender registries, the number of internet users seeking this information has not changed significantly since 2006. One in five internet users say they have searched for information about their neighbors or people in their community, which is about the same as the 17% who reported this in the previous survey.

All internet users under the age of 65 are equally as likely to seek out information about their neighbors, while just 10% of internet users over age 65 go online to search for people in their community. Other groups who are more likely to be interested in their neighbors' digital footprints include:

- **Parents** – Among online parents, 23% have searched to find information about their neighbors on the internet, while 17% of non-parents have done this.
- **Broadband users** – Those with high-speed connections at home are more likely than dial-up users to seek out information about their neighbors online (21% vs. 13%).
- **Wireless users** – Those with wireless connectivity are also more likely than the wire-bound to check up on their neighbors (21% vs. 14%).

- **SNS users** – One in four (25%) users of social networking sites have sought information about neighbors online, compared with 14% of non-SNS users.

### **New connections inspire new searches; 19% of internet users have searched for information about someone they just met or were about to meet for the first time.**

Overall, one in five (19%) internet users have searched online to find information about someone they just met or were about to meet for the first time, up from 11% in 2006. One of the practical uses of people search tools is to learn basic information about someone—such as contact information or place of employment—either before or soon after meeting that person. However, even simple name searches can reveal much more detail than that, including photos, videos and social media profiles. As noted in the previous chapter, 42% of internet users say that photos of them are available online for others to see, while 10% say they know that videos of them are available. Likewise, 46% of online adults are users of social networking sites who have created their own profiles for others to see.

There are little or no differences across different racial and ethnic groups as well as across income categories for this question. However, several groups are notable for their tendency to seek out information about those they have just met or are about to meet for the first time:

- **Men** - Online men are more likely (22%) than online women (16%) to search the internet for more information about the new people they meet.
- **Young adults** – Internet users ages 18-29 are the most likely to research their new connections online; 28% of online adults ages 18-29 conduct these searches, compared with 20% of those ages 30-49, 13% of those ages 50-64 and 4% of those ages 65 and older.
- **College grads** – Among internet users with a college degree, 27% search for information about new people they meet, compared with just 13% of high school grads.
- **Broadband users** – Internet users with broadband at home are twice as likely as dial-up users to seek information about new people they meet (21% vs. 9%).
- **Wireless users** – Wireless internet users are also twice as likely as the wire-bound to search for information about new people they meet (22% vs. 11%).
- **SNS users** – Social networking users are three times as engaged with this type of searching as their non-SNS using counterparts; 29% of SNS users search for information about people they have just met or are about to meet, compared with just 10% of non-SNS users.

### **More daters now do their relationship homework online; 16% of online adults have sought information about someone they were dating or in a relationship with, up from 9% in 2006.**

Since 2006, internet users have become more likely to search online for information about the people they are dating or in a relationship with. One in six (16%) internet users now say they have researched their romantic partners online, up from one in ten (9%) in the previous survey. Interestingly, online men are just as likely as online women to search for information about those they are dating or in a relationship with. There are no differences among racial and ethnic groups and only significant differences among the highest and lowest socioeconomic groups (with the highest income and education groups

being somewhat more likely than those with lower levels of education and income to search for information about their romantic interests).

However, those who use online dating websites (8% of adult internet users) are twice as likely as non-online daters to search for information about their romantic partners online (34% vs. 15%). In addition, the following groups tend to use online tools to research their mates:

- **Young adults** – Internet users ages 18-29 are more likely than older users to seek information about romantic interests online. Nearly one in three young adult users (29%) search for information about people they are dating or in a relationship with, compared with just 6% of users ages 50-64.
- **Broadband users** – Users with high-speed at home are almost four times as likely as dial-up users to seek information about romantic interests online (19% vs. 4%).
- **Wireless users** – Those with wireless connections are twice as likely as the wire-bound to check out their mates online (20% vs. 9%).
- **SNS users** – Users of social networking sites are four times as likely as non-users to research their romantic partners online (28% vs. 7%).



## What we search for

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### While basic contact information continues to top searchers' lists, demand for social networking profiles and photos has grown considerably over time.

Looking at the 69% of internet users who have searched for information about others online, seven in ten say they have gone online to find someone's contact information, like an address or phone number. This proportion is essentially the same as our 2006 survey, when 72% of those who had searched for information about people in their lives said they had sought contact information.

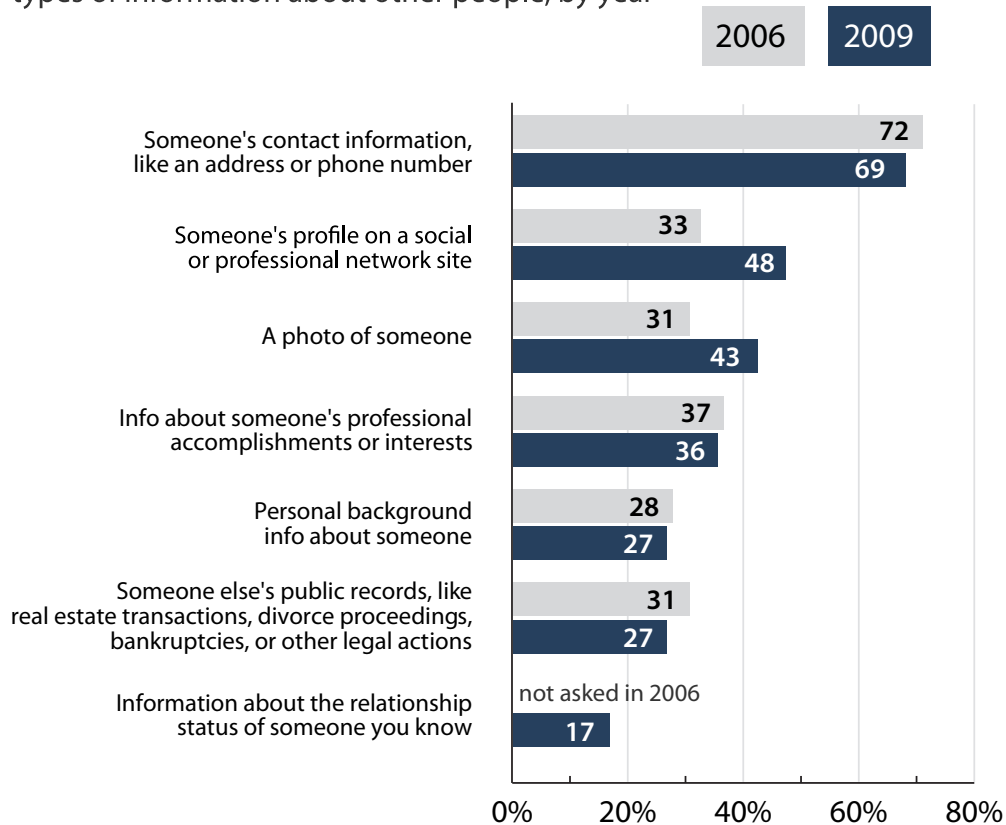
By contrast, searches for social networking profiles have grown by 45% during that same period—from 33% in 2006 to 48% in 2009. Likewise, searches for photos of someone grew by 39%—from 31% to 43%.

While young adult internet users ages 18-29 are somewhat less likely than older users to search for basic contact information, they are significantly more likely to search for social networking profiles and photos:

- **Contact information:** 62% of people searchers ages 18-29 say they have searched for someone's contact information, like an address or phone number, compared with 73% of those ages 30-49, and 74% of those ages 50-64.
- **Social networking profiles:** 66% of people searchers ages 18-29 say they have searched for someone's profile on a social or professional networking site, while 51% of those ages 30-49 and 31% of those ages 50-64 say this.
- **Photos:** 61% of people searchers ages 18-29 say they have searched for someone's photo online, compared with 43% of those ages 30-49 and 32% of searchers ages 50-64.

## What we search for about others

% of internet users who have ever searched online to find the following types of information about other people, by year



While there are no significant gender differences among those who search for contact information or social networking profiles, men are considerably more likely than women to search for photos of people online. Half of men who search for information about others online say they search for photos, while just 36% of female people searchers say they have searched for images of someone.

### Internet users are now more likely to search for social networking profiles than they are to search for information about someone's professional accomplishments or interests.

In the age of social media, it is now the case that a Facebook profile may get more traffic than your resume or your bio on your employer's website. Over time, people searchers have become more likely to seek out social networking profiles than they are to see information about someone's professional accomplishments or interests. While 37% of people searchers said they had sought this kind of information in 2006 (making it the second-most popular kind of search), 36% reported the same in 2009 (making it the fourth-most popular query). That compares with almost half of people searchers who say they seek out profiles online.

Once again, men are more likely than women to initiate this kind of search; 41% of men who search for information about others say they have looked for information about someone's professional accomplishments or interests, compared with 31% of female searchers. Those who have a college degree or live in higher income households are also more likely than those with lower levels of education or income to conduct this kind of search.

### **Personal background information and public records interest one in four internet users who search for information about others online.**

Overall, 27% of people searchers say that they have sought personal background information about someone online. That number is essentially the same as 2006, when 28% reported seeking background information about someone on the internet. Similarly, 27% say they have searched for someone else's public records, such as real estate transactions, divorce proceedings, bankruptcies, or other legal actions. The portion who report doing this now is slightly lower than it was in the previous survey, when 31% said they had looked for someone's public records online.

Searchers who are ages 30-64 are more likely than the youngest and oldest segments of internet users to seek out public records online. While 21% of people searchers in the 18-29 age group say they have tried to find public records about someone online, 29% of those ages 30-49 and 33% of those who are 50-64 have done so. Just 18% of searchers ages 65 and older have looked for someone's public records online.

### **One in six searchers say they have gone online to find information about the relationship status of someone they know.**

Sharing information about your relationship status—whether you are single or in a relationship, for example—has become a standard feature of many social networking profiles. However, this kind of information could also be gleaned from other sources, such as blogs, public records or publicly shared photos. Overall, 17% of internet users who seek information about others online have looked for relationship status information about someone. Unsurprisingly, young adults are by far the most active in seeking out relationship status information. Fully 39% of people searchers ages 18-29 have looked for someone's relationship status online, compared with just 13% of searchers ages 30-49, 4% of those ages 50-64 and less than 1% of those ages 65 and older.

Those who use social networking sites—who also tend to be younger—are far more likely to say they have specifically searched for relationship status information. One in four (27%) social networking users who have sought information about others online say they have looked for relationship status information, compared with just 5% of non-SNS users.

### **Yet, for all of the people searching internet users do online, most think that it's not fair to judge people based on the information they find.**

As noted above, most internet users have searched for information about people in their lives. However, when asked if they agree or disagree with the following statement, "It's not fair to judge people based on the information you find online," fully 81% said they agree. Almost half (45%) say they strongly agree with that statement, while 36% said they somewhat agree with the statement. Overall, just 14% of internet users disagree, with 6% saying they strongly disagree.

Among those who search for information about others online, the results were nearly identical to those for all internet users. Overall, 83% of people searchers said they agree that it is not fair to judge others based on the information you find, while 45% strongly agree. Likewise, 13% disagree with that statement and 5% strongly disagree.

### **Half of internet users say it bothers them that people think it's normal to search for information about others online.**

Despite all their searching and reputation management practices, many users seem to be bothered by their own behavior. Fully 50% of internet users agree with the following statement: "It bothers me that people think it's normal to search for information about others online." About one in four (23%) say they strongly agree with this statement, while 27% say they somewhat agree. However, four in ten internet users (40%) disagree with this statement--13% strongly disagree, and 27% somewhat disagree.

Those who search for information about others online are less likely than non-searchers to say they are personally bothered by the practice. Yet, 47% still agree with the statement overall, with 18% of people searchers saying they strongly agree that they are bothered compared with 36% of non-searchers.

### **Internet users are divided about whether or not access to online information about people makes the process of getting to know them easier and more meaningful.**

Half of internet users (48%) say they agree that "getting to know new people now is easier and more meaningful because you can learn things online about the people you meet." Yet, almost as many (43%) disagree with that statement. Just 9% say they strongly agree with that statement, while 39% said they somewhat agree. Of those who disagree that getting to know new people has been made easier because of online information, 20% say they strongly disagree and 23% say they somewhat disagree.

Those who have searched for information about others online are more likely than non-searchers to think that the process of getting to know new people has become easier and more meaningful. Overall, 54% of people searchers agree that getting to know people now is easier, compared with 38% of non-searchers.

## Part 4: Implications

### **Americans are increasingly aware that online reputation matters, but the full scope of its influence is difficult to assess.**

While more Americans are keeping tabs on their online reputations through search and social media, it is nearly impossible to measure the full range of influence that information has on their everyday interactions. Very few internet users report bad experiences due to embarrassing or inaccurate information appearing online, but there are undoubtedly others who have been affected without realizing it. On websites such as Openbook ([www.youopenbook.org](http://www.youopenbook.org)) examples abound of social media users—both young and old—sharing information that they presumably do not realize is publicly accessible.

By the same token, there are many positive effects associated with a certain level of visibility online. Growing numbers of internet users are leveraging the social power of the internet to reconnect with friends from the past and far-flung family members with whom they have lost touch. Employees are building professional reputations online and collaborating with colleagues through social media sites. Those who are seeking romantic partners use online tools to learn more about their prospective dates. Each of these phenomena is facilitated by some amount of information disclosure, and users are increasingly forced to anticipate all of these potential audiences when making decisions about the information they share in public and semi-public spaces online.

### **Young adults more actively restrict access to the information they share, but the efficacy of these limitations is unknown.**

Young adults, perhaps out of necessity, are much more active curators of their online identities when compared with older adults. When they change privacy settings, delete tags and comments, and request that information about them be removed, they are demonstrating a desire to exert control over the content they share and the tide of information that others post about them online. However, certain privacy controls on social media sites have become increasingly difficult to navigate. These changes, instituted after the data for this report was gathered, raise questions about the efficacy of users' current efforts to restrict access to the information posted to their profiles.

It is also the case that younger adults report a wider array of information being available about them online when compared with older adults. In that sense, they have more to manage and more to limit. Older adults may self-censor by simply choosing not to disclose certain information or engage with certain online tools. However, the information we voluntarily share about ourselves online is only one element of our digital footprint; the details that others share about us are much less predictable and arguably require even greater vigilance to manage.

### **Reputation management is a moving target with many factors outside of a user's control.**

When search engines alter the way they deliver search results and social media sites make successive revisions to privacy settings and policies, even the most attentive reputation managers may find it difficult to keep up with all of the changes. The fact that Americans overwhelmingly feel as though it is not fair to judge people based on the information you find about them online may be a response to these uncertain conditions.

## Methodology

This report is based on the findings of a daily tracking survey on Americans' use of the Internet. The results in this report are based on data from telephone interviews conducted by Princeton Survey Research International between August 18 to September 14, 2009, among a sample of 2,253 adults, 18 and older. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects is plus or minus 2.3 percentage points. For results based Internet users (n=1,698), the margin of sampling error is plus or minus 2.7 percentage points. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting telephone surveys may introduce some error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

A combination of landline and cellular random digit dial (RDD) samples was used to represent all adults in the continental United States who have access to either a landline or cellular telephone. Both samples were provided by Survey Sampling International, LLC (SSI) according to PSRAI specifications. Numbers for the landline sample were selected with probabilities in proportion to their share of listed telephone households from active blocks (area code + exchange + two-digit block number) that contained three or more residential directory listings. The cellular sample was not list-assisted, but was drawn through a systematic sampling from dedicated wireless 100-blocks and shared service 100-blocks with no directory-listed landline numbers.

New sample was released daily and was kept in the field for at least five days. The sample was released in replicates, which are representative subsamples of the larger population. This ensures that complete call procedures were followed for the entire sample. At least 7 attempts were made to complete an interview at sampled telephone number. The calls were staggered over times of day and days of the week to maximize the chances of making contact with a potential respondent. Each number received at least one daytime call in an attempt to find someone available. For the landline sample, half of the time interviewers first asked to speak with the youngest adult male currently at home. If no male was at home at the time of the call, interviewers asked to speak with the youngest adult female. For the other half of the contacts interviewers first asked to speak with the youngest adult female currently at home. If no female was available, interviewers asked to speak with the youngest adult male at home. For the cellular sample, interviews were conducted with the person who answered the phone. Interviewers verified that the person was an adult and in a safe place before administering the survey. Cellular sample respondents were offered a post-paid cash incentive for their participation. All interviews completed on any given day were considered to be the final sample for that day.

Non-response in telephone interviews produces some known biases in survey-derived estimates because participation tends to vary for different subgroups of the population, and these subgroups are likely to vary also on questions of substantive interest. In order to compensate for these known biases, the sample data are weighted in analysis. The demographic weighting parameters are derived from a special analysis of the most recently available Census Bureau's March 2008 Annual Social and Economic Supplement. This analysis produces population parameters for the demographic characteristics of adults age 18 or older. These parameters are then compared with the sample characteristics to construct sample weights. The weights are derived using an iterative technique that simultaneously balances the distribution of all weighting parameters.

Following on the next page is the full disposition of all sampled telephone numbers:

Table 2: Sample Dispositions

Landline	Cell	
<b>21,993</b>	<b>8,765</b>	<b>Total Numbers Dialed</b>
1,215	172	Non-residential
1,156	9	Computer/Fax
13	---	Cell phone
9,203	3,296	Other not working
1,154	167	Additional projected not working
9,252	5,121	Working numbers
42.1%	58.4%	Working Rate
385	56	No Answer / Busy
1,597	1,511	Voice Mail
49	4	Other Non-Contact
7,221	3,550	Contacted numbers
78.1%	69.3%	Contact Rate
670	633	Callback
4,710	2,100	Refusal
1,841	817	Cooperating numbers
25.5%	23.0%	Cooperation Rate
75	16	Language Barrier
---	229	Child's cell phone
1,766	572	Eligible numbers
95.9%	70.0%	Eligibility Rate
73	11	Break-off
1,693	561	Completes
95.9%	98.1%	Completion Rate
19.1%	15.6%	Response Rate

The disposition reports all of the sampled telephone numbers ever dialed from the original telephone number samples. The response rate estimates the fraction of all eligible respondents in the sample that were ultimately interviewed. At PSRAI it is calculated by taking the product of three component rates:

- Contact rate – the proportion of working numbers where a request for interview was made
- Cooperation rate – the proportion of contacted numbers where a consent for interview was at least initially obtained, versus those refused
- Completion rate – the proportion of initially cooperating and eligible interviews that were completed

Thus the response rate for the landline sample was 19.1 percent. The response rate for the cellular sample was 15.6 percent.