

Online privacy matters

IN BRIEF

In this report we help you to:

- understand how Webwise works and how it could affect your privacy
- find out which ISPs are considering Webwise.

Webwise wants to track your internet habits so it can send you more relevant ads. But is it a useful service or an invasion of privacy?

Would you let a stranger into your home to collect information about the DVDs you watch, just so you could get more relevant junk mail? Nearly 11 million households in the UK could soon be asked a similar question if BT, TalkTalk and Virgin Media decide to launch Webwise, an internet behaviour-monitoring service.

Webwise tracks your web-browsing habits to build an anonymous profile of your interests. This profile is then sold to advertisers so they can send you more relevant ads.

Phorm, the company behind Webwise, is adamant that the service is secure, anonymous and legal. But some critics believe that Webwise invades privacy and breaks laws. In a recent

survey of 2,643 Which? online panel members, 9 in 10 voiced concerns about their surfing habits being shared, with 4 in 10 saying that they would consider leaving their ISP if it introduced Webwise. So, should you be worried?

Behaviour tracking is not new – it happens to us every day as we shop and search the net, for example when using search engines such as Google. But Webwise is different. Though it doesn't collect personal data, it monitors every single web page you look at so it knows more about your online habits.

Data protection and privacy

The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), which is responsible for enforcing the Data Protection Act (DPA), said last year that Webwise

complied with DPA law. Privacy International agrees that Phorm offers a high standard of data protection.

But data protection and privacy are very different. Phorm strongly believes that Webwise meets UK privacy laws, but privacy campaigners disagree.

It all depends on your definition of 'private'. Phorm won't know who you are, but it will know what you like. And other users of your computer could see ads related to things that you've done online.

Customer choice

BT, TalkTalk and Virgin all promise to give customers a choice about Webwise. But how customers are given that choice is crucial. An opt-in system (where the default is off and it's up to you to turn it

PHORM: THE BACKGROUND

ISPs considering webwise

In early 2008 BT, TalkTalk and Virgin Media signed deals with Phorm to evaluate its Webwise service. Phorm says that, though it provides the technology, ISPs will decide how they manage Webwise.

We spoke to BT, TalkTalk and Virgin about their plans but none could confirm if, or when, they will launch the service.

BT appears to be the closest to launch as, unlike TalkTalk

and Virgin Media, it has already conducted three customer trials. As yet, no other ISPs have signed deals with Phorm.

How Webwise works

If you opt in, Phorm sends your computer a 'cookie' containing a unique identification number (UID) that is used by your web browser.

As you surf, Webwise 'observes' the sites you visit and the pages you look at.

If you surf pages matching a list of predefined categories, such as travel, health and finance, your interests are stored against your Phorm ID to build an anonymous profile of you.

All other web-browsing behaviour, including adult or illegal sites, is ignored. Webwise also ignores names, emails, secure (HTTPS) pages or numbers longer than three digits – such as credit card numbers or Pins.



FAQS

Q What happens if I opt out?

A An anonymous cookie will be sent to your computer. When you try to access the internet your ISP will read this cookie, see you are opted out and send you directly to the internet, without passing through Phorm's servers.

Q What is a cookie?

A A cookie is a small data file that most websites send to your computer, for example, to help them identify you if you return.

Q What if I regularly delete my cookies?

A Your Webwise opt-out cookie will be deleted, and you'll have to opt out again next time you go online.

Q Can I block Webwise permanently?

A Yes. Phorm says you can block Webwise by adding 'www.webwise.net' to your blocked cookies. To do this, open your internet browser, select 'tools', 'internet options' then 'privacy'. There should be an option to block specific sites.

Q Can I switch Webwise on or off?

A Once Webwise is launched you can switch it on or off at any time, by visiting www.webwise.com.

Q Will ISPs make money out of Webwise?

A Yes. Partner ISPs will share a proportion of the £28bn online advertising industry.

Q What is phishing?

A Scammers send emails that appear to come from a trusted source, such as



a bank. They try to trick you out of personal information, such

as Pins and passwords, by directing you to a bogus site that looks just like the real thing.

Q I'm unhappy with my ISP partnering with Phorm. What can I do?

A Contact your ISP to complain. If you're still unhappy, switch ISP – see www.which.co.uk/switchingISP.

on) is very different from an opt-out system (where the default is on).

Last year the ICO recommended that, to meet privacy laws, Webwise should be an opt-in service. TalkTalk told us: 'Our service would be opt-in. We've said that all along.' But BT and Virgin both told us that they hadn't decided yet.

Getting permission

The Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA) prohibits interception of communications without consent from both parties. All three ISPs promise to get consent from customers before implementing Webwise. We don't yet know how they plan to do this, but it could be complicated.

Many households share a PC, so what if the Webwise invitation pops up while a child is using it? He could click to 'opt in', effectively giving consent for his entire household.

BT told us: 'The user of the PC at the time a Webwise invitation is shown should always seek the consent of the account holder prior to accepting or declining the invitation.' But we don't think this is realistic. One possible solution might be for the Webwise invitation to request a customer account number for verification.

Clear communication

It's important that invitations spell out exactly what Webwise does. We asked

BT for a copy of the invitation used in its third trial, but it didn't respond, so we found screenshots of the invite posted by BT customers online. This invite focused on the 'exciting' benefits of the service, but we don't think it made it clear that customers would have their internet movements tracked.

Don't be blinded by benefits

Webwise offers customers more relevant ads, but 84% of you wouldn't be happy to have your surfing habits tracked in return for targeted advertising.

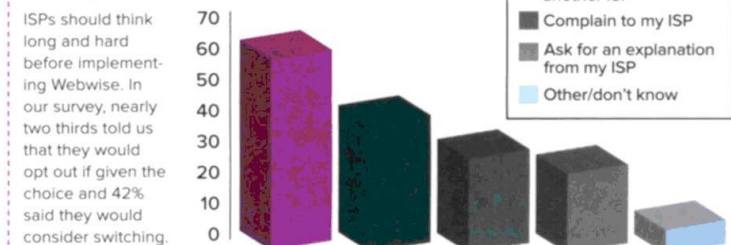
It also offers anti-phishing security (see FAQs, above), but Internet Explorer and Firefox both have this built in.

Which? says

Ultimately, it will be up to individuals to decide whether they want Webwise or not. But we feel strongly that the service should be opt-in and that all customers should be given clear, transparent information about all aspects of Webwise so that they can make an informed decision about taking part. We'll be keeping a close eye on BT, TalkTalk and Virgin to make sure consumers are given a fair choice.

Member survey findings

What would you do if your ISP announced that it was launching Phorm/Webwise? (base: 2,643 respondents)



KEY

- Opt out
- Consider switching to another ISP
- Complain to my ISP
- Ask for an explanation from my ISP
- Other/don't know