: an Introduction

protection of personal privacy has always been interlaced with the development of communication and media technologies. Insurgences of privacy concerns in the last century have all coincided with major shifts in communication technologies.

In the late 1880s and early 1900s, newspapers provided the major source of news in America. In order to increase circulation, the publishers of these papers often exploited their position by sponsoring flamboyant and irresponsible approaches to news reporting. Detailed descriptions of personal lives often were the topics of news. During the same period the growing popularity of camera has resulted in the increasing use of unauthorized portraits of people in newspapers. These social changes triggered a major wave of lawmaking to protect personal privacy in the United States.

Another wave of public concerns of personal privacy began when wiretapping of telephone conversations became a common practice by governments and businesses in the 1920s. Many researchers believe that this wave of public concern was a direct result of threats to personal privacy arisen from technological innovations permitting electronic surveillance upon telephone and other conversations.

The rapid development in interactive and networking media in recent decades has once again dramatically changed the ways in which individual privacy can be threatened. Demands for personal information sharing in today's society are becoming more common than ever before. Even the most routine human activities, such as grocery shopping, involve the sharing of one's personal information. With the increasing ease

of monitoring, recording, and digesting users' personal records, unauthorized collection and exchange of personal information and behavioral patterns are common practices adopted by many commercial entities.

A person's online privacy may be threatened by individuals, commercial entities, or government agencies. Hackers may gain access to an individual's personal computer through the Internet connection. They can also intercept personal data during transmission. Harmful computer programs such as Spyware, AdWare, or viruses can be distributed under the disguise of personal e-mails.

Online privacy is also at risk when Internet users visit commercial Web sites. Highly personal and sensitive information (e.g., credit card numbers, phone numbers, addresses, etc.) submitted to a commercial Web site is often sold to third parties for marketing purposes without first-party consent. Most commercial Web sites also send small computer programs, known as "cookies," to be stored on visitors' personal computers in order to record and track their Internet browsing history and patterns.

In addition to privacy threats from individuals and commercial entities, legislative changes in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks have also significantly expanded surveillance and investigative powers of law enforcement agencies in the United States. In other parts of the world, online surveillance, data mining, and cross referencing technologies have been developed and widely adopted by governments.

Online Privacy Protection

Although government around the world enacted various policies to ensure netizens' online privacy, such

legal protection are often ineffective because of a lacking of a clear and universal understanding of the concept itself. While different countries offer privacy projections according to their legal and cultural traditions, users of the Internet are not bounded by the traditional sense of geographical and social boundaries. This also significantly reduces the effectiveness of online privacy protection initiatives. As such, online privacy protection lies primarily in the hands of Internet users themselves.

There are a number of ways in which people can protect their online privacy. For example, user can refuse to give information to a Web site, refuse to use a Web site or purchase something from a Web site, set their computers to reject cookies, and intentionally supply false or fictitious information to a Web site when asked to register. Paradoxically however, while Internet users around the world report very high levels of concern about online privacy, they have little specific knowledge of marketing practices that may violate personal privacy. The use of useful privacy protection tools and other precautionary measures is low even among those who claim to be very concerned about their privacy. Recent studies found that the adoption of self-protective behaviors against online privacy violations may be linked not only to users' knowledge and experience, but also to individual difference in privacy related-beliefs and attitudes, and people's cognitive ability to perceive threats in the virtual environment.

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Online Privacy

There is no doubt that personal privacy is one of the biggest concerns of Internet users today. The rapid advancement of network and computer technologies during the last fifty years has dramatically changed the ways in which personal information is created, stored, retrieved, and shared. Massive amount of personal information are stored in digital formats that are easy and cheap to access, duplicate, and transfer. The increasing reliance on digital and network communication often force citizens of modern societies to choose between not participating in some of the most basic social activities, such as staying in touch with family and friends, banking, and shopping, and sacrificing their personal privacy. So how much privacy do we really have on the Internet? How is privacy protection in the virtual world different from that of the offline physical world? What does privacy mean in a modern information society anyway? This article aims to provide a brief overview of the notion of personal privacy and the interconnections between media, communication, and privacy in a digital world.

Defining Privacy

One of the most difficult issues in any discussion of privacy is the concept itself. While privacy is often recognized as a universal human right, what is considered to be "private" varies from person to person, society to society, culture to culture, and time to time. Furthermore the concept of privacy is complicated by the fact that the word "privacy" is such a commonly and loosely used word by almost everyone, that it may mean completely different things to a lawyer than it does to a layperson.

Generally speaking, intellectual discourses on personal privacy can be organized around three distinct areas: philosophical, legal/political, and social/psychological. Each of these areas engages the topic of privacy for different reasons and asks fundamentally different questions. Philosophical debates on privacy often treat the "private" and the "public" as two dichotomous domains of human life. Legal and political discussions of privacy, on the other hand, are most often driven by practical concerns such as making decisions on when or under what circumstances one's privacy rights are violated, and assigning appropriate punishment for such violations. Finally, social scientists tend to treat privacy as a social and psychological human need. They focus on how individuals define and manage private space so as to maintain appropriate distance from one another across occasions and social space.

Many scholars argue that privacy, as a well-defined and intellectually studied phenomenon, is inherently Western. Indeed, almost all influential thinkers within the Western philosophical tradition, from Aristotle to John Stuart Mill, have made some sort of distinction between "public" and "private" spaces. Many of the cornerstones of Western philosophy such as liberty, private property, and freedom of expression, hinge on the very notion that there is a private sphere of human life that should be free from interferences and intrusions from the public.

In the Chinese culture, similar values to privacy can be dated all the way back to the Warring State Period, but discussions of privacy as a well-defined social construct have only begun in recent decades only as a result of Western influence. From a semantic point of view, for example, some scholars believe there is no direct Chinese equivalent to such an expression as "a sense of privacy". While the English language makes a rather clear distinction between "privacy" and "private", the word "私"(of private or personal) in Chinese covers the meaning of both terms, bringing much ambiguity to the character. Some scholars have even gone as far as arguing against the presence of a concept of privacy in the traditional Chinese culture. They maintain that one cannot define and protect individual privacy in Chinese societies by referring to a right to privacy, because the concepts of "public" and "private" in Chinese culture are defined in highly abstract ethical terms rather than from a Western socio-spatial perspective.

However, while the Chinese language may not have equivalents to privacy-related terms, the presence of privacy-related desires and behaviors should not be ignored. The desire to be left alone and to be free from intrusions is believed to be a universal human need instead of being culturally specific. Though the nature and extent of privacy may differ from that of Western cultures, Asian cultures may have similar values such as solitude, intimacy, and secrecy. Even if we were to accept the argument that the Western notion of privacy do not adhere to the traditional Chinese culture, one must face the fact that a discussion of privacy is relevant and necessary regardless of cultural differences when it comes to the borderless and multicultural environment of the Internet.

Communication, Media, and Threats to Privacy

Historically speaking, the