

Panel on Infomediaries and Negotiated Privacy Techniques

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If data privacy is information self-determination, what is the future role of technology and corporations in assisting individuals to articulate their determinations? One fashionable business model is the “infomediary,” a company that acts as a data-broker on behalf of consumers, monetizing permission to use personal information. The best-known “negotiated privacy” technology, the Platform for Privacy Preferences (P3P), aims to provide automated matching of privacy “terms” for online interactions. Are these developments what people want? Will they protect privacy? Might they make laws unnecessary, or are new laws actually needed to make them work? What does recent experience suggest for the future?

The bestselling 1999 business book “Net Worth: Shaping Markets When Customers Make the Rules” by John Hagel and Marc Singer defines infomediaries as “brokers or intermediaries that help customers maximize the value of the data.” This expands on a 1996 paper in Harvard Business Review. The book’s prediction of a multibillion industry has prompted considerable momentum to implement the idea. Several startups have announced their entry into the “infomediary” space including Privaseek, Lumeria, Popular Demand, Enonymous, PrivacyBank. Novell’s digitalme and Microsoft’s passport have aspects relating to the infomediary task. A host of other startups perform related functions of distributing and aggregating personal information.

P3P, the Platform for Privacy Preferences is a project of the World Wide Web Consortium exploring (among other things) how to exchange summaries of information practices in a decentralized and global medium. [<http://www.w3.org/TR/NOTE-P3P-CACM/>]

What is the concept of an infomediary as described by Hagel? How likely is his vision of a multibillion dollar industry? What is the current status of infomediary players? Can permission to use personal data become a commodity that can be brokered on standardized terms? Exactly how would this work? Are infomediaries good for privacy? Good for e-commerce? How much do consumers stand to benefit? What risks does it to individuals?

How do infomediaries relate to negotiated privacy technologies such as P3P? What are the goals of P3P? What is the development status of P3P? What hurdles is P3P facing? How will it meet its goals? What effect will P3P have on privacy? What is the relationship between negotiated privacy techniques and legislative or regulatory approaches to privacy? How do infomediaries and P3P relate to the idea of propertizing privacy rights?