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More Consumers Willing to Share Sensitive Information Like Their Social Security Number, Reveals Latest ARF Privacy Study

Third annual report explores shifts in consumer attitudes towards digital privacy, mobile vs. PC usage, and trust in institutions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

New York, NY, September 21, 2020 — While the types of information people are willing and not willing to share have generally remained consistent, the willingness to share more sensitive data – social security numbers, financial information and medical information – is greater in 2020 than in both 2018 and 2019, according to the ARF’s (Advertising Research Foundation) third annual Privacy Study.

This slight increase occurred during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, the willingness to share such information is somewhat greater for people whose jobs have been affected by the pandemic and significantly greater for those who have known someone with COVID. For example, respondents that had their work hours or salary reduced are more willing to share information about a recent doctor’s visit (69% vs 57% of those who experienced no impact to their job).

Additionally, most people are willing to share health-related information about themselves if it is used to fight COVID-19. For example, mask-wearing, though a political touchpoint in some parts of the country, is the piece of health information that Americans are most willing to share (83%). However, while contact tracing is considered a key weapon in the fight against COVID-19, one quarter of the sample expressed an unwillingness to share information about being exposed to someone with the virus. Furthermore, 47% somewhat or strongly disapprove of letting government agencies temporarily gather data from mobile phones to improve compliance with measures to protect public health.

“This year’s report is particularly unique because it captures how the pandemic has affected consumer attitudes around privacy and trust in institutions. In 2018 and 2019, there was a general decline in the willingness to share personal information, but some of that reversed in the current survey,” said Paul Donato, chief research officer, the ARF. “It will be interesting to see how these sentiments evolve along with crisis developments, as well as after the upcoming election.”

Additional survey findings include:

- **PC and mobile usage:** PC use has rebounded after last year’s decline, presumably because people have been spending more time at home due to stay-at-home orders. The use of the mobile web and mobile apps also continues to rise.
- **Privacy policy terminology:** Understanding continues to increase and tends to be greater for higher income people, people in their late 30s and early 40s, and those living in the Northeast or

West. In particular, the percentage who clearly understand the term “third-party data” increased by 10 percentage points since last year. Other terms whose clarity increased include pixel tags (+8 percentage points), application data caches (+8) and local data storage (+7).

- **Coronavirus-related terms:** At least one quarter of the population is confused by frequently used terms such as “herd immunity,” “PPE” and “aerosolized droplets”. The most confusing term to the public among the dozen covered in the survey is “epidemiological models” (note that this reflects the comprehension level during late April).
- **Trust:** The most trusted sources of information about the virus are doctors (76%), scientific and technical experts (68%), and people like themselves (59%), followed by state and local institutions. Trust in scientists and technical experts rises with increasing education, and the more serious a threat people regard COVID-19, the more they trust the federal government, Congress, and scientists and technical experts.
 - **By political inclination:** Republicans trust the President (71%) and the Federal government (52%) far more than Democrats (23% and 32% respectively) and Independents (30% and 32% respectively).
 - **By gender:** Men are more trusting of information from most sources than women. For example, 46% of men trust the President for virus information vs. 34% of women.
 - **By race:** African Americans (23%) and Asian Americans (30%) trust the President far less than whites (46%).

The ARF’s annual Privacy Study was launched in 2018 as part of an initiative to advance data privacy and protection guidelines for the advertising industry.

For more information on the survey, [please visit ARF](#).

Study Methodology:

The ARF conducted its third annual Privacy Study by surveying 1,200 American consumers from April 24th to the 27th, 2020. In comparison, the first study was conducted during the week of May 28th, 2018, and the second during the week of March 26, 2019. All three surveys were conducted using a Qualtrics online sample and platform, with quotas for age, gender and region, based on the distribution of the US population. This year included new questions about trust, privacy and terminology surrounding the pandemic.

About The ARF

Founded more than 80 years ago, the ARF is dedicated to creating, curating, and sharing objective, industry-level advertising research to enable members to make a true impact on their advertising and build marketing leadership within their organizations. It has more than 400 members from leading brand advertisers, agencies, research firms and media-tech companies. For more information, visit www.thearf.org.

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