

Data collection disclosures have app developers thinking outside the box

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Just a few years ago, I would have never imagined fast food outlets posting nutrition information or liquor companies are getting closer to adding nutrition labels to their products. Perhaps in this new era of better informing consumers, it should come as no surprise that the idea seems to be spreading to the world of mobile apps.

Last week, some of the players in the mobile app world announced an agreement to test a voluntary code of conduct requiring app developers who participate in the program to disclose what types of personal information the app collects about the user.

According to a story in The New York Times (<http://nyti.ms/1dYMP6D>), the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, a division of the U.S. Commerce Department brought together consumer and privacy advocates, app developers, digital marketers and civil liberties groups for this initiative that intends “to increase mobile app transparency for consumers” and which is comparable to the nutrition labels present on the packaged food we buy.

But just like the nutrition labels that appear on, say, a box of cereal, there’s little digital nutritional value for consumers. What the app developers do with the contact lists, phone numbers and web history gleaned from a smart phone is about as mysterious as some of the sugars and preservatives listed on that cereal box. The Google Play store on my Android already alerts me to what information the apps I download can access, and after a bit of hesitation I make the download or purchase. For all my preaching about privacy, I’m hard pressed to think of a time when I declined an app based on the information I’m given. So keeping with the cereal box comparison, we know it’s probably not good for us but we consume it anyway.

And this is one area where we have nobody to blame for invasions of privacy but ourselves. Here, we have the option to decline the invasion. Conversely, whenever

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we surf the web or use our cell phones, we know that our personal information is accessed and exploited by all kinds of entities, but we have no choice than to be proficient on the web and use our cells if we want to function in today's society. If you want to drive, of course, the ACLU has just reported law enforcement's highly ubiquitous license plate scanners that will track your every move mostly without limitation. But, if we want do something more frivolous on our phones such as play a video game, we have nothing to lose if we simply say "no way." Trouble is, just like my trips down the cereal aisle, impulse often wins.

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