PERMISSION TO INNOVATE FOR PRIVACY, PLEASE

The Internet's great potential often comes from its fertility as an incubator for permission-less innovation. Duangthip Chomprang, Manager Regional Affairs (Asia-Pacific) of the Internet Society, looks at the role of emerging technologies, in conjunction with policy controls, in enhancing users' understanding and management of online privacy (excerpt from a presentation titled "Privacy and the Evolving Internet Identity: Food for Thought"): 

The Richness of Technical Innovation

A great advantage of a fertile environment for permission-less innovation is the diversity to which it can give rise. Let's look at three areas which, although quite different, can all contribute to enhanced user privacy online: the evolution of infrastructure technology (WebRTC) the application of revolutionary R&D (DNA as a data storage medium), and the deployment of privacy-friendly services (ephemeral disclosures in social media).

These and other emerging technologies will further push the boundaries for communications anywhere, anytime, and round the clock, and we have already begun to experience them in our everyday lives whether we are aware of them or not (for example, geo-location, pervasive sensors and identifiers in SoLoMo and Google Glass).

Web RTC opens the door for users and businesses to interact directly with one another in real time and in a truly peer-to-peer manner, by implementing simple application interfaces in pervasive browser technology. New discoveries to store digital data via DNA sequencing technology could mean virtually infinite space to store and retrieve data or information over long periods of time, under the user's direct control.

Both these innovations have the potential to reduce users' dependence on third-party processing of data they may wish to keep private. Innovative solutions for Social Media, such as Wickr and Silent Circle, are starting to allow users to decide how long a message will persist, and what gets stored or destroyed. This can increase each user's control over how long a piece of personal data remains accessible once disclosed.

All these areas of innovation are potentially privacy-enhancing. However, today our digital life generates ever more personal data, and from a technology standpoint, that data is ever easier to collect, communicate and monetize. Innovation can give rise to new forms of privacy risk, which technology on its own cannot necessarily mitigate.

Non-technical Privacy Innovation

On the street, and in parallel with rapid technological change, there is an emerging ecosystem of non-technical innovations to help meet users' privacy and identity protection needs. These include trust insurance, third party identity providers, identity data protection and management services.

The Policy Challenge

Just as technical privacy protections need the kinds of non-technical supporting factors outlined above, so policy and legislation need to play their role in helping safeguard user privacy while ensuring that innovation can continue apace. Lawmaking and technology, though, move at very different rates, and we can observe different maturity states in different jurisdictions around the world.

Most countries in the world have some form of privacy and data protection laws, but some still lack effective policies and regulations. For example, Singapore recently passed a personal data protection bill
early this year, and Malaysia, The Philippines, Taiwan and Korea all have laws in the books, but not all countries in the region have followed suit.
Elsewhere, the EU enacted an e-Privacy Directive to regulate a number of aspects, including the use of cookies, with the intention of protecting privacy and ensuring user consent. However, it’s possible they may have made the legislation too technology-specific to be genuinely effective. Although these are all steps in the right direction, keeping the law up to date with the ever-changing environment of the digital world is a constant challenge, and one which increasingly requires governments to work together to find answers across borders as there is no single solution.

**Striking the Balance**

Even with these initiatives by society, security issues will continue to grow across the board and within the industry. Some of these issues may actually stem from existing discontinuities within the current context: the tension between users’ needs for privacy and choice on the one hand, and the commercial interest of businesses on the other; and the constantly-changing role of technology in delivering them.
But the real challenge lies in drawing the line between over controlling and continued open choices for users. If there is a generally-agreed principle here, it is that there is no single “right answer” to the privacy question. Rather, the solution should be in proportion to the threat it addresses, without compromising the rights and current/future choices of the users. Experience tells us that sustainable solutions have to be based on a combination of technical and non-technical measures, and must reflect the valid interests of all the stakeholders.

If the principles of stakeholder engagement, and complementary technical and non-technical innovation are truly absorbed, there is hope that there will be a safe place for your privacy in the future.
The Internet and its permission-less innovations have made the world a better place to live in, with diverse content, rich enabling capabilities, and interactive platforms. However, privacy and trust must be permission-based. To achieve that, open systems and open standard principles must be embraced. This will allow stakeholders to address the challenges of the Internet and Social Media in an open and transparent manner. Only then can we build the network of trust.