Who are you online, and why does it matter?

Advice you've probably seen

1. Don't share personal information online
2. Make sure there's a privacy policy and read it
3. Try to avoid tracking cookies using private browsing

Is it any good?

It is prudent to assume that anything you do online can be seen, like how someone could recognise you when walking through a busy shopping centre. But most of us like using Facebook and to stay in touch with friends, and equally like to use platforms like Instagram to share pictures. Not sharing information does not seem to be a good option.

Every website is legally required to have a privacy policy. But just having a privacy policy doesn't mean they might not be collecting and using data for purposes you disagree with. It's certainly worth having a look at it if you are in doubt, or just search for information on the company online. If you find them too long, the language difficult to understand, and not very informative, don't worry – that's in fact a common problem with such policies.

Websites like to track your activity online, while you are visiting them but also as you are browsing the web. Browsers can ask web sites to stop tracking ('do not track' feature). However, there's no strict requirement for websites to follow this request.

Being aware and managing what happens online

As you are surfing the world wide web information on your activities is being collected. You are searching for flights online and subsequently adverts offer hotels in the city you were planning to travel to. The linking of information to learn something about your plans, preferences, or desires might not always be welcome. 'Tracking cookies', browser 'finger printing' or the use of 'tracking contents' provide ways to link information.

Modern browsers and their extensions offer privacy/tracking protection. You can also install browser extension such as Privacy Badger to block requests to other sites which are required for tracking. If you are generally annoyed by ads when browsing the web, try addons like Privacy Badger – but keep in mind, not seeing ads doesn't mean you are not being tracked.

At some point, we have to share information online to access services we want to use, for example DropBox. But did you know that companies like DropBox can be 'hacked'? Your email address and password could be compromised by a data breach. You can use services like haveibeenpwned.com to check if you are affected.

Don't forget

There's a new law in power since May 2018. The General Data Protection Regulation allows you to learn about what data online platforms hold on you. You can exercise your rights such as receiving a copy of your data or getting any of the data corrected.

Not all is bad. There are many resources available that provide recommendations and advice for more specific areas. If you are interested in smart home devices, for example, the Mozilla Foundation might have reviewed the kind of device you are looking for.