

# HOW TO MAINTAIN PRIVACY ONLINE

by Dr. Stephane Laverdiere



Society today is connected in more ways than ever before. Although there are many advantages to having the world at your fingertips, the downside is that maintaining privacy has become increasingly difficult. While we all might have different reasons for desiring our personal privacy, it's always wise to take the necessary steps to avoid becoming a victim of those who exploit this technology for the wrong reasons. However complicated this might seem it's often the one step you overlook that ends up causing you the most trouble.

Here are some of the most important steps you can take:

## 1. Computer Security Programs

There are so many free versions of these programs available, that there really isn't any excuse for not having basic computer protection that includes anti-virus, anti-spyware and firewall software. All of these are necessary to help keep virus-writers, hackers and other cyber-criminals from taking control of your computer and stealing information that might compromise your safety and privacy. Never browse online without some type of reputable security software.

## 2. Routers

DNS Hijacking tricks are not new, neither is router vulnerability but as

security overall becomes tighter criminals have been drawn back to router attacks. Criminals are using a known path into routers by changing the router's DNS configuration remotely so they can collect personnel information. The attacks can interfere with your internet connection but more specifically are designed to steal banking information, Facebook and Google passwords. The threats are coming mostly to individuals using e-banking.

The next thing you need to do in security is secure your own router. Change the default username and password. Update the routers firmware to the latest patched version. Disable the remote administration feature and configure the router only from the local network or LAN.

## 3. Beware Of Cookies

Cookies are tricky, because there's a trade-off involved. Cookies allow websites to collect information about your personal preferences, enabling them to target you with specific advertising to suit your interests. This targeted approach brings in plenty of ad revenue, enabling many of today's most popular social media sites to continue operating free-of-cost to the average user.

While this might speed up your browsing experience, keep in mind

that your computer might also be storing third-party cookies from various ads that belong to sites you may never have actually visited. This information about your browsing or spending habits is sometimes shared with other sites and individuals — some of whose intentions might be shadier.

When you consider that many sites will not allow access unless you have cookies enabled, it's easy to see how anyone's information can be compromised. Although it's up to you to decide whether or not to enable cookies, most experts recommend at least disabling third-party cookies, clearing your cache regularly and being careful about what types of sites you visit.

## 4. Avoid Posting Personal Information

This should go without saying, although many people continue posting their personal information and unflattering photos without even stopping to read a website's privacy policy. Along with addresses and phone numbers, even email addresses should be posted with caution and all statements regarding privacy should be read first and thoroughly understood.

## 5. Social Media Privacy Settings

Social networks can be a great way to keep in touch with family and friends, particularly those who live in other cities or across the globe.

You can even track down lost contacts that would ordinarily be quite difficult to find. However, there are also a growing number of stalkers, debt collectors and identity thieves who have developed their own uses for social media. Be sure to read the privacy policies of any such site you use and adjust your privacy settings in the safest way possible, without taking all of the enjoyment out of the experience. Although each site will do things a bit differently, the point is to adjust these settings to allow only people you know to find you, view your postings and contact you.

### **6. Beware Of Usernames**

When it comes to privacy, your name is where it all starts. Although certain social media sites require their users to use their real names (to prevent someone else from setting up a profile with your name), it's often better to avoid this, whenever possible. Making up a creative username that does not include your full name or date of birth will make it much harder for the wrong people to find you.

### **7. Don't Use The Same Password For Everything**

We all know what a nuisance it is to have so many different pin numbers and passwords, all for access to different accounts. However, it's a much greater nuisance to have

someone steal that password and have a field day with it, when they figure out how many different accounts it will get them into. Although experts recommend against writing all your different passwords down anywhere that such a list can be found, consider using your imagination a bit when doing so. You might try coding or cyphering them, such as by adding or subtracting one or two letters or numbers for each character (such as writing "b" for "a" and "2" for "1"). This way if someone does get their hands on the list (which should always be unlabeled) all that mixed-up gibberish will be useless.

### **8. Use Strong Passwords**

If you take the advice listed in step 8, there should be no reason why you would need passwords that are so easy to remember (and easy for others to figure out). Mix them up as much as you can, using as many letters and numbers as possible.

### **9. Avoid Sharing Your Location**

Letting everyone know where you are at a given time is clearly not a wise thing to do. You might think you know every one of your "followers" on social media well enough, but many victims of stalkers, muggers and rapists would tell you otherwise. In addition to exposing your own location, you're also letting potential burglars know that

you're not home and if they know enough about you from your postings, they might also know whether anyone else lives there. Disable any GPS (global positioning system) trackers on your computers and mobile devices that might be giving your location away when you access certain websites.

### **10. Perform A Search For Yourself Online**

Just type your name into a search engine now and then and see what comes up. You need to know what's out there, so that if there's anything objectionable, you can take the appropriate steps to have it removed. Remember that employers and insurance providers may be searching for you as well and certain photos, postings and affiliations can tarnish your professional reputation and discourage others from working with you.

### **11. Use Aliases Whenever Possible**

Finally, one of the best ways to keep your private life to yourself is to use an alias, or pseudonym. This is a tool that writers have long used to maintain their anonymity and as long as you're not exposed by someone who knows your real name, you'll be able to maintain a greater degree of separation between your personal and professional lives.

As much of a hassle as it might seem to take all of these steps, you'll find that those who are willing to go that extra mile are the ones who manage to stay below the radar. Remember that although much of what's out there is considered "public information" that can be found in a thorough search of existing public records, very few will go through all that trouble to find you when they can simply pick up your trail online. Although some of these suggestions might seem like mere common sense, most people's privacy is actually compromised when they neglect putting them into practice.

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*About The Author — Dr. Stephane Laverdiere is a contributing author to DC Products Review.*