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TECHNOLOGY

Web newspaper registration stirs debate

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PHILADELPHIA, Pennsylvania (AP) -- Imagine if a trip to the corner newsstand required handing over your name, address, age, and income to the cashier before you could pick up the daily newspaper.

That's close to the experience of many online readers, who must complete registration forms with various kinds of personal data before seeing their virtual newspaper.

The requirement has irked some readers and privacy advocates, led to the creation of Web sites to foil the system, and could be failing to provide the solid demographic information that the system was intended to capture.

Despite these concerns, a growing number of newspapers, including The Philadelphia Inquirer in March and The Atlanta Journal-Constitution in April -- have moved to online registration in the past year.

Industry representatives argue that because their Web readers get the same content as the paper-and-ink edition without paying for it, it's fair to ask them for personal information in exchange for access. They also say that collecting such data is becoming essential as the news business evolves.

"One of the things newspapers are trying to do is get a grasp on who's using their Web site and how much, whether they're people who already subscribe (to the print edition), people who live outside the area," said Scott Bosley, executive director of the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

"The other thing is that down the road, newspapers are trying to figure out when and where they can charge," he said. "Ultimately, they want to see what people will pay for news. I don't think anybody's comfortable enough to say they know the answer yet."

The industry has not tracked the shift in detail, but news organizations and marketing groups say an increasing number of newspapers have begun requiring online registration, particularly in the last 12 months or so.

Some forms require the most basic information, like gender and year of birth. Others ask for what amounts to a personal profile that can include name, birth date, job title, income range, e-mail and home addresses, home phone numbers, and interests and hobbies.

The data can then be used to help publications better know their online readers, and make themselves more attractive to advertisers.

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However, some privacy groups are crying foul. Chris Hoofnagle of the Electronic Privacy Information Center in Washington, D.C. says sites will be pushing for even more invasive disclosures as demographic data becomes muddled by peeved users who practice "self-defense" by registering themselves as 110-year-old surgeons from Bulgaria named Mickey Mouse.

"The marketing is becoming less effective, so the marketers are pushing for more invasive registrations," he said. "They know specifically what articles I'm reading, they know all about me, and I know very little about them. It's a complete imbalance of power."

When The Atlanta Journal-Constitution implemented online registration on April 12, a flurry of e-mails and calls from angry readers followed, ombudsman Mike King said.

"The prevailing story line on the complaints was that people thought it was unbecoming of a newspaper to ask for (personal) information and that it came as a shock because we provided (online content) for free for so long," King said.

He said travel Web sites, cell phone services, catalogs and other online entities typically ask for more probing information than newspapers do.

The Philadelphia Inquirer started online registration in March, asking readers for e-mail, home address, gender and birth date. About 10 percent to 15 percent of the 300,000 registrations to date have bad e-mail addresses, said Fred Mann, general manager of Philly.com.

Mann said in an e-mail that the complaints generally fell into three categories: People who had technical problems, those who objected to giving out personal information, and those who "railed that we were pigs and were 'ruining the Internet!'"

"We helped the first group through it. We reassured most all of the second group with a strong privacy policy. The third group still doesn't like it and I presume many of them did not register with us," he said.

BugMeNot.com is one Web site created to allow users access sites without registering. The site provides "communal" logins and passwords for sites including registration-required sites like those for The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Philadelphia Inquirer, the Los Angeles Times and now The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

BugMeNot's home page states that more than 3,000 Web sites have been "liberated" since its inception in November. The site calls compulsory registrations intrusive, irritating, spam-promoting, and counter to the Internet's free spirit.

King said that as newspapers adapt to an online world, continually updating stories in real time on their Web sites, it will become more costly to do business and new revenue sources must be found.

"Our view is that we need help from you: We've got to pay for what we do, we've got to convince advertisers into looking at us and tell them that these are the demographics we now know about our readers," he said. "The old standard -- advertising geared to people who live in the areas we cover -- doesn't work anymore."

Newspapers haven't reported large amounts of falsified data. However, forced registration sites as a whole have a 10 percent to 20 percent "bounce-back rate" -- e-mails sent to abandoned, falsified or otherwise nonworking addresses, said analyst Eric Peterson of JupiterResearch, in Darien, Conan.

"You'll always lose people when you put up a barrier for them to get information," he said. "We'll eventually see companies get smarter about what they can ask and how to ask, or see their customers go elsewhere."

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