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Who’s Watching You?

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More Internet users are relying on VPNs – apps called Virtual Private Networks – that keep your Internet activity from prying eyes – than ever before. As more of us pay our credit card bills online, buy tickets from online travel agencies, and read our email, it’s clear online privacy is getting much more attention.

Most Americans are unaware that in 2017, Congress passed, and the president signed a bill trashing an F.C.C. rule.

That rule would have required Internet providers to get permission from customers before selling their web browsing history and other private information to advertisers, ad agencies and others.

Instead, Internet providers are free to sell your personal data, despite your objections. Isn’t this backwards? Shouldn’t you be able to decide who sees your browsing habits, your email, the banks with whom you do business, and your Social Security number?

Personal information such as which illnesses you’ve searched in a web browser, where you bank, where you shop, and potentially even where your child or grandchild goes to school can now be accessed by the company you pay for Internet service.

To prevent this, more and more of us are paying for VPNs to keep prying eyes away. The COVID–19 pandemic is having a major impact on VPN use.

“When the pandemic hit in 2020, VPN demand skyrocketed, driven by the increased use of internet-based services at home, and the evolution of remote work. During the first two weeks between March 8th and March 22nd alone, VPN usage in the USA increased a massive 124%,” reports Findstack.

A blog called The Cornwall Seeker writes, “A decade ago, Only a third of Americans and 20% of the people in the U.K. knew what a VPN was. Now, 68% of all adults in the U.S. use a VPN according to security.org.”

A just–released poll by Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research and Meritalk reveals that most Americans believe their personal online information is not at all secure.

Most polled believe social media activity such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram is not very or not at all secure. 50% say private text conversations lack privacy.

In addition, many are not satisfied with the federal government’s total lack of action. Nearly 75% of those polled support establishing national standards for how companies can collect, process and share personal data.

The Associated Press quotes Sarah Blick, a professor of medieval art history at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, northeast of Columbus as saying, “I feel there is little to no security whatsoever.”

Earlier this year, the college’s human resources department told Blick that someone fraudulently applied for unemployment insurance benefits in her name. As we spoke about during the September Tech Night Zoom session, VPNs can keep your online activity secure – but only if you use them on all of your Internet devices.

If you missed Tech Night, check out A Beginner’s Guide to Understanding VPNs.

If you’re ready to choose a VPN, see what [Top10VPN](https://www.forbes.com/advisor/business/software/why-use-a-vpn/) considers its best VPN services.

Tom’s Guide lists its top choices in the best VPNs.

Because so many Americans (and Internet users all over the world) are currently considering a VPN, it’s a very competitive market.

As I mentioned during Tech Night if you can afford it, you can get better pricing if, rather than buying a VPN for six months or one year, you pay for a two- or three-year period.

What To Look For In a VPN

Security & Privacy: As one website says, “A VPN is only as good as its ability to keep you and your data safe.”

Speed: Since a VPN is rerouting your Internet connection through its own private servers, if there aren’t enough servers your speed can suffer. The best VPNs have vast networks all over the world. If you cannot connect to one server because too many people are connected at the same time, you simply choose another server.

Ease of Use & Customer Support: It should be as simple as moving a slider button on your phone or double clicking a tab on your Mac or PC to activate a VPN. If you have trouble with a VPN – or questions – the company needs to provide customer support. Period.

Performance & Server Locations: The more servers there are, the better chances you have to connect to your VPN if there’s congestion. If you cannot connect to a server closest to you, then there should be one fairly close by. (Connecting to a VPN server in St. Louis or Virginia rather than St. Croix or Germany or Australia will typically give you faster Internet speed from your computer, phone, or iPad in Kentucky.)

Price: Find a VPN that you can afford. Avoid free VPNs. Many of them generate revenue by displaying plenty of ads. So, as you’re trying to use the Internet, you’re constantly disrupted by ads. Free VPNs often have few servers, and it might be a challenge to find one located near you. What you might not know is that many free VPNs use your computer’s processing power when it’s not in use. In addition, your activity might be tracked, your browsing details may be sold, and your Internet connection is often slow. Also, it’s been discovered that China owns a number of free VPNs. Do you really want your personal Internet data going to Chinese authorities?

No Logging: The best VPNs will not track your web browser visits, your email, your social media usage, or other Internet activity. VPNs that do track your activity usually have one goal in mind: Making money. They want to sell your personal data.

“One quarter of all Internet users have accessed a VPN in the last month,” wrote Rob Mardisalu on the thebestvpn.com website in January 2020.

Here’s a breakdown by device:

Desktop: 17% (had used a VPN in the last month as of Jan. 2020.) Mobile: 15%

Tablet: 7% For some, using a VPN was as common as washing their hands. bestvpn.com reports in early 2020, 35% of desktop computer users and 42% of mobile users (phones, laptops, iPads) had used a VPN every day.

VPN Users by Age (source: thebestvpn.com)

55-64 years old: 4%

45-54: 9%

35-44: 19%

25-34: 33%

16-24: 35%

The Asia–Pacific region has the highest number of VPN users (30%), while North America and Europe lag with far fewer VPN users (17%).

It turns out retaining anonymity (and keeping personal data private) is the strongest motivator to use a VPN in: the USA, Sweden, Canada, France, Japan, Germany, and South Africa. In other countries, folks use VPNs to stream TV shows and movies that have not yet been released or are off limits in those regions. In China and Russia, reporters use VPNs to get around repressive, dictatorial Internet restrictions.

Need more details? There are a number of websites that describe VPNs in simple English so that all of us can decide what’s best for us individually.

Here are some links providing details, descriptions, and information about VPNs that are easy to digest:

[How–To–Geek](https://www.howtogeek.com/133680/htg-explains-what-is-a-vpn/) [Tricky Enough](https://www.trickyenough.com/use-a-vpn/) [Forbes Advisor](https://www.forbes.com/advisor/business/software/why-use-a-vpn/)