

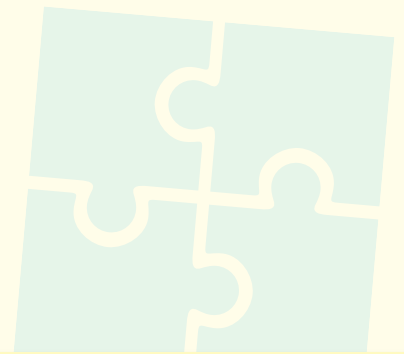
# Chapter 14

## Digital Trails: What You Leave Behind



### Overview

To post or not to post? That is the question. In this chapter, you will learn about digital trails—information about yourself that the online world can see—and come to understand that every action you make online contributes to your trail. Included is a discussion of ways to lessen your digital trail, control what is on it, and manage it so that it has only positive effects on your education, your future career, and your relationships.



### Key Terms

- Digital footprint
- Digital trail
- Data brokers
- Invisible audience
- Internet address
- Cookie
- Oversharing
- Appropriate sharing

## Digital Trails

When Internet use became widespread in the mid-1990s, many people thought that the actions they took online were anonymous and untraceable. Today, we know that isn't true. Each step we take on the Web leaves a **digital footprint**, or information about ourselves that the online world can see. Digital footprints are also known as a **digital trail**.

Think about what happens when you go hiking in the woods. Your boots leave impressions in the dirt. As you walk, you may accidentally drop something or step on plants. All these things leave a trail that could be followed by someone who knows how to track.

The same thing happens with the actions you take while online: They leave a digital trail that can be followed. Some of your actions can be easily tracked by just about anyone who goes online. Other actions can be tracked by people who are experienced in tracking, such as **data brokers** (companies that collect and sell data about consumers), marketers, and advertisers. And still other actions can be tracked only by people with certain levels of authority, such as law enforcement officials.

### The Invisible Audience

It's important to remember that just about any action you take online might be viewed by an **invisible audience**, a group of people that you are not aware of and that you never expected to notice or care about your online actions. The invisible audience ranges in size, and it includes marketers, advertisers, data brokers, and friends of friends on social media networks. If you post content on sites where all content is public, such as YouTube, your invisible audience could number in the millions.

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Follow the trail: Each step we take on the Web leaves a digital footprint, or information about ourselves that the online world can see.

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email



forum



post



tag



visit  
website



text





## Follow the Trail

A digital trail is made up of any action you take online. It can even include actions that other people take online, if they concern you. **Some actions that make up a person's digital trail are listed below:**

- **Sending emails** and email attachments
- **Registering on a forum** or any website
- **Posting on social media** accounts and uploading photos and videos
- Being **mentioned or tagged** in other people's posts, photos, or videos
- Visiting **websites**
- Sending **texts**
- Using **store rewards** cards
- Using **GPS**
- Carrying a **mobile device** that has wireless capability and is turned on

For instance, if you use an email service provider, it knows the information you used to sign up for your email account, including your full name and street address. It also knows your **Internet address** (a number assigned to your computer or mobile device that allows it to participate in a network), as well as your contact list. Your Internet service provider also knows this information.

### Browser History

When you use a search engine to look for information, you type in keywords. The next time you start to type in a search, old searches might pop up. This can be a useful feature, but anyone using your device can see what you've searched for recently. Similarly, Web browsers store user history. Again, this can be helpful, especially if you've forgotten a website address. However, anyone using your device can easily see what websites you've visited. You can counter these threats to privacy by clearing your browser history. (The method of doing this varies, depending on the computer or mobile device you are using.)

A digital trail is made up of any action you take online.



## How Cookies Work

You do an online search for sneakers.

Your search brings up a link to sneakers.com. You click the link and visit the site.



When you land on the site, a cookie is immediately downloaded from the site to your computer.

### Cookies

When you visit a website, you leave information on your digital trail. A **cookie**, or small file that identifies you as a unique user of a website, is downloaded to your computer. The next time you return to the site, the cookie allows the site to identify you as a user who has been there before. Cookies, which can contain account names and passwords, can make browsing the Web easier and faster, because they allow websites to “remember” you and the actions you took last time you were on the site.

However, hackers can use the cookies stored on your device to gain information about you, and the cookies make it easier for companies to sell you products. On many websites, marketing and advertising firms have access to the information collected by cookies, or they have their own cookies embedded on the site. They use the cookies to track what you view online so they can tailor advertisements to your interests and better persuade you to buy something. For instance, if you click on a website that contains information about party planning, you might begin to see ads for balloon bouquets, bakeries, and other party supply businesses. The companies don't necessarily know your name, but they know you by your cookies. If you don't like being tracked in this way, you can clear the cookies from your device. (Again, the method of doing this varies from device to device.)

### Rewards Cards

Similarly, if you use a store rewards card at your local grocery store, the purchases you make are tracked, and the store shares that information with marketers. These companies send you coupons and other offers. Some people like these offers. Others feel they violate their privacy, and they often decide not to use rewards cards.



## Social Media

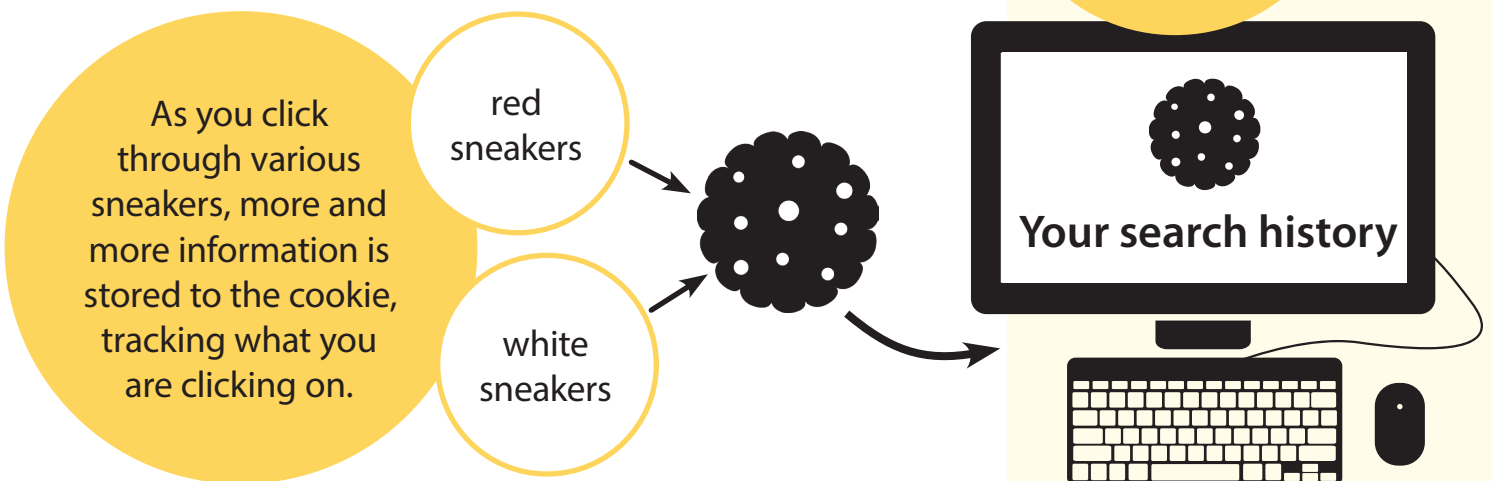
On social media sites, anything you post, or that someone posts about you, is part of your digital trail. You might think that information can be deleted from the Web, but someone else may have already downloaded it and saved it to his or her own computer. For instance, friends can share the photos you post with others—even people you don't know—making your invisible audience much larger than you expected.

Some social networking sites allow marketers to gather information about their users, although some sites say they present the information in a way that cannot be linked to the user's identity. This information includes posts, photos, videos, or websites or articles that you have "liked" or "shared." Marketers then use this information to show you targeted ads.

## GPS Technology

If you carry a mobile device, you leave a literal digital trail. Your location can be tracked through GPS or through your wireless signal. (Wireless technology allows devices to connect wirelessly to the Internet.) You can counter this by turning off your mobile device and by turning off the wireless technology when you're not using it.

Law enforcement officials (and in some cases, private investigators and attorneys) can follow your digital trail fairly closely. With a *subpoena*, or written order usually made by a court, police officers can access a list of the phone numbers you called on your mobile device (and which numbers called you); where you were on a certain date (from location tracking via your mobile device); the Internet address of your computer; and the websites you have visited.



## Fact!



### Did You Know?

Having an invisible audience isn't all bad. In fact, 19% of employers say they have found something positive in a candidate's digital trail that caused them to hire that person, including creativity, good communication skills, well-roundedness, and a professional image.

*Source: CareerBuilder*

## The Impact of Digital Trails

The Internet has changed many things in our lives, often for the better. However, we have to remember that everything we do online can have an impact on our identity, because once something is online, it more than likely will stay there forever. Content posted online—whether it's photos, text, or documents—can be searched for and shared in a matter of seconds, leaving a long digital trail.

In fact, it can be a little shocking to learn just how long a digital trail we all leave on the Internet. Our actions online are certainly no longer anonymous or untraceable, if they ever were. The good news is that we all can take steps to manage our digital trails.

Why should we care what is found on our digital trail? One of the most important reasons is reputation management. We want to ensure that the trail we leave behind us is a positive one, free from hurtful or inappropriate content. If our digital trails contain negative actions or information, it can cause us embarrassment and damage our reputation.

Keeping our relationships healthy and happy is another reason to care about the content of our digital trails. What we say about others online can dramatically impact personal relationships. Negative content can embarrass or hurt other people and can damage their reputations. If you use the Internet to vent anger, express personal feelings about someone else, or say something hurtful, the result can sever relationships.

## Cleaning Up Your Digital Trail

After you read this chapter, you probably will realize that there are some aspects of your digital trail that you should manage more carefully. **Use the tools below to help you in that effort:**

- [msisac.cisecurity.org/newsletters/2012-07.cfm](https://msisac.cisecurity.org/newsletters/2012-07.cfm)
- [internetsociety.org/your-digital-footprint](https://internetsociety.org/your-digital-footprint)
- [aplatformforgood.org](https://aplatformforgood.org)
- [socialmediaexaminer.com/cleaning-your-digital-footprint](https://socialmediaexaminer.com/cleaning-your-digital-footprint)





Another important reason to be concerned about what we leave on our digital trail is that negative content can impact our education and career. Universities use social networking sites to gauge the character of their applicants. Many employers also use the Internet to research job candidates. With the cyberworld expanding, the audience for our digital trails is also growing. **Before you post anything online, think about how it might affect your image in terms of future educational opportunities and employment:**

### 1 Schools

Schools use the Internet as a tool to monitor students outside the classroom. A recent example in the news highlighted a group of friends that bragged on Facebook about cheating on an exam. When a teacher read the posts, she reported them to the principal, and the students faced expulsion. It's easy to forget that many eyes are watching online—many more than we may ever realize!

### 2 Employers

The Internet now makes it possible for potential employers to learn more about who you are before hiring you. But even after you are hired, you must be careful about what you post online, because employers may also monitor social networking sites to see what their employees are up to. If employees write posts such as “work is lame. . . I hate my boss” in a public online space, they could risk losing their jobs.

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Negative content  
can impact your  
education and career.

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## Fact!



### Did You Know?

A whopping 43% of employers scour social networking sites to investigate the character and behaviors of potential job candidates.

*Source: CareerBuilder*



## Fact!



### Did You Know?

In March 2014, Facebook announced that it had 1.28 billion monthly active users. Now that's a big potential audience!

*Source: Facebook*



Consider these factors to help you identify what is appropriate to post.

## Oversharing

While we inevitably share information about ourselves when we communicate online, remember that **oversharing** can lead to potentially dangerous situations such as identity theft. Information can also be broadcast to an enormous invisible audience that you may not intend to reach.

Oversharing can result in embarrassing moments or a tarnished reputation. It can also leave one vulnerable to security risks if private information, such as a home address, is shared.

**Remember never to share online the information listed below:**

- Full name
- Social Security number
- Address
- Phone number
- Passwords
- Birth date
- Parents' or guardians' full names
- Parents' or guardians' credit card numbers

## What Is Appropriate?

While we want to keep our private data out of our digital trail, it is safe to use the Internet to share some personal information. Think back to Chapter 4, where you learned about the differences between private and personal data. Private data, such as your Social Security number, should never be part of your digital trail. But sharing personal information—such as your favorite sports teams, music, or movies—is **appropriate sharing**, as long as it is done respectfully and with the permission of a parent or guardian. **Before you post anything, think about the five factors listed below:**

### 1 The Consequences

Will your actions hurt yourself or others? Be considerate of others, and ask if they mind if you post photos of them online.

### 2 Wise Choices

What do your critical thinking skills tell you are the right choices to make?

### 3 The Long-Term

Remember that information posted online will be there forever.





#### 4 The Invisible Audience

Just because you can't see them doesn't mean that there aren't people viewing your information whom you did not intend to be in your audience.

#### 5 Accountability

Regardless of what information you share online, be accountable for your actions.

## What If You Make a Mistake?

While it is important to make every effort to make wise choices when posting anything online, what happens if you realize you've made a mistake and posted something you shouldn't have? If you've posted something about yourself that will reflect negatively on you, delete it. If any of your friends have a copy of your post (or photograph or video), ask them to delete it too. If you post someone's photo without permission or write a negative post about someone, your first action should be to delete the photo or post. Then, contact the person you've wronged and apologize—in person if possible. Promise never to do such a thing again and ask for forgiveness.

If you've shared private information about yourself—such as your Social Security number, home address, or passwords—you should delete the information and tell a trusted adult immediately. These pieces of information can be subject to identity theft. Further action, such as reporting the incident to a service provider, may be required to ensure your identity is safe.



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If you post someone's photo without permission or write a negative post about someone, your first action should be to delete the photo or post.

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# Chapter 14 Assessment

## What Do You Think?

Write a two-paragraph reflection on what it means to leave a digital trail. Your paragraphs should answer the following questions:

- 1 What actions help build your digital trail?
- 2 How can you manage your digital trail in a positive way?
- 3 What information should you never leave on your digital trail?
- 4 Why is oversharing a bad idea?
- 5 What parts of your digital trail were you unaware of before you read this chapter? How do you feel about them?

## Challenge: What Would You Do?

In this chapter, you learned about the actions that form your digital trail. Now, apply what you have learned. Read the scenario below and write one paragraph explaining what you would do if faced with a similar situation. Use what you have learned in this chapter to justify your reasoning.

### Scenario:

Mica learns that at a college to which he is applying, admissions officers read potential students' Facebook pages. The officers take into account the information they find when making final decisions about which students they accept. Mica is worried that there might be some negative information on his Facebook timeline. He is also worried about other parts of his digital trail, such as websites he has visited, online gaming forums he has commented in, and emails he has exchanged with friends.

**If you were Mica, what would you do?**



## Extension Activities



### Activity 1 Short Answer

Write a one- or two-sentence response to each of the prompts below.

- 1 Define the term *digital trail*.
- 2 Describe what is included in a digital trail.
- 3 Identify three consequences of a negative digital trail.
- 4 Identify the five factors to think about before posting content online.
- 5 Explain what to do if you have made a mistake and posted something negative online.

### Activity 2 Matching Activity

Using what you have learned in this chapter, match each term below with its correct definition.

- |                       |                      |               |
|-----------------------|----------------------|---------------|
| 1 Digital trail       | 2 Cookie             | 3 Oversharing |
| 4 Appropriate sharing | 5 Invisible audience |               |
- 
- A. A collection of information about yourself that the online world can see
  - B. Disclosing personal information such as your favorite sports teams, music, or movies
  - C. A large group of people that you may not realize has access to your personal information on the Web
  - D. Can result in embarrassing moments, a tarnished reputation, and vulnerability to security risks such as identity theft
  - E. A small file that identifies you as a unique user of a website

*continued*



## Extension Activities

### Activity 3 Case Studies

Read each of the cases below and determine what you would do if it happened to you. Write one paragraph for each situation, using what you have learned in the chapter to justify your answers.

#### Situation ①

A friend tags you in a photo that you don't want on the Internet.

**What do you do? What are the long-term consequences?**

#### Situation ②

You wrote something mean as a joke in an online forum, and now you feel bad about it.

**What do you do? What are the long-term consequences?**

#### Situation ③

You accidentally tell someone your password for your email account.

**What do you do? What are the long-term consequences?**



## Hands-On



### Follow Your Digital Trail

To get a sense of your digital trail, track your use of the Internet for one day and see what type of digital trail you are leaving behind. Create a table similar to **Table 14.1**, shown below. Be sure to include where you went on the Internet, what you did, and how you think your actions might impact your digital footprint, both positively and negatively.

Table 14.1

| My One-Day Digital Trail                    |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| Where I Went                                | What I Did  | Impact on My Digital Trail   |
| I visited Facebook for about 30 minutes.    | I looked at a few of my friend's profiles and then I posted pictures from a field trip we took last week. I tagged four friends and my teacher in the photos. | This influences my digital footprint because now my friends can see my pictures. I also added their names to them, so now their friends can see them. This could be negative if my teacher or my friends don't want pictures of themselves online or if they don't want anyone else to see them. |
| I visited YouTube after I went to Facebook. | I watched a bunch of short videos on. . .   |  |
|   |   |  |
|   |   |  |