

Protocols are for sharing

The Internet began with the notion that it would be good to connect computers to one another; and then networks of computers to one another. The idea being that it was good to be able to share information between computers.

Since the early days of the Internet, it was common for people to use these networking revelations to communicate with one another. Bulletin boards, email, The World Wide Web, social networking sites. All about people communicating information with each other.

These technologies are supported by protocols designed to enable interoperability at all levels in the networking and communications technology stack. In the best cases (TCP/IP) there is only one protocol in use at a particular level. In other cases, there is more than one, but the basic point is that protocols enable interoperability between disparate organizations and technologies.

The IETF, the W3C and all other standards communities exist to promote technical interoperability for the purposes of widely sharing data between their participants and the users of technology created and promoted by those participants.

Protocols and formats are for sharing of data, not keeping it private.

Privacy preferences don't technically force privacy

A good start on improving privacy would be to ensure that ALL data formats and protocols provide a commonly-agreed mechanism to convey privacy preferences of the author/owner of the data being communicated in the data/protocol.

Many protocols or data formats, however, have been invented for the purpose of communicating the privacy preferences of an individual user. They have largely failed (see P3P) and usually not because the formats are themselves technically "bad".

There is perhaps no single reason why privacy preferences, and their enforcement have largely failed, but there are some possibilities:

- No business imperative for protecting privacy (users don't care until things are really broken)
- A strong business incentive to discourage it (the advertising business model)
- Technical solutions which enable easier, wider sharing of data
- Lack of political or legal pressure to encourage privacy
- Inability for technology alone to prevent (other than by not having technology) the sharing of private data either accidentally, or on purpose
- No general agreement on the preferences to be communicated
- The technical difficulty of conveying the importance of privacy preferences to real people in a friendly manner.

In order for technology which protects privacy to be deployed, there would need to be strong social and

political pressure to deploy and use such technology, in addition to commonly-agreed technical solutions.

Conditions necessary for privacy?

- Widely-agreed idioms for communicating privacy preferences which could be technically include in many different technical formats and protocols (a privacy "ontology"?)
- Social, political and legal advocacy for technologies which enhance privacy, regardless of business imperative
- Business models which both make money and allow real user participation in protecting their privacy (where the user can clearly see the tradeoff between the value of sharing data and the risk of losing privacy)

Privacy Commons

One model which has had *some* success is that of Creative Commons, where common idioms for communicating "content attribution" information have been developed, and are supported by advocacy within business and government, as well as by technical and legal work.

The idea that privacy is for the "common good" seems compelling to many - so why not a not-for-profit Privacy Commons, where we develop common idioms for privacy preference sharing which may be applied to many protocols and formats, and advocate widely for their use?

Summary

- Protocols and data formats do not ever preserve privacy; they sometimes convey privacy preferences between parties, but that is a best-case scenario, and does not, in itself prevent wide sharing of data by parties involved in the exchange of data.
- General common privacy idioms are needed, which can then be advocated for conversion to technical protocol bits in various organizations, protocols and formats. Getting agreement, however, will still be hard.
- An advocacy group similar to Creative Commons may provide both the external-to-business need to create common idioms, and the social mission and connections necessary to advocate for such an approach at high levels in both business and government.