

MAPPING OUR DIGITAL FOOTPRINT

Loredana CONDREA*, Catalina SIMINIUC

Department of Software Engineering and Automation, group FAF-231, Faculty of Computers, Informatics, and Microelectronics, Technical University of Moldova, Chisinau, Republic of Moldova

*Corresponding author: Loredana Condrea, loredana.condrea@isa.utm.md

Abstract. *This study intricately explores the domain of digital footprints, highlighting their relevance across diverse academic realms. It delves into terms like "digital footprint" and "digital image of a person," stressing the necessity for specialized methodologies in managing digital traces. The article navigates through challenges in handling digital information publicly and underscores its significance in sociology, economics, and psychology. It concludes that digital footprints, emanating from online interactions, offer invaluable insights into human behavior and societal dynamics, thus shaping contemporary research paradigms. With the rapid expansion of internet users globally, the discussion on digital footprints and their management becomes increasingly vital, paving the way for potential legal frameworks and specialized professions like digital curators.*

Keywords: *awareness, digital footprint, youth, digital image of a person.*

Introduction

A growing proportion of people utilize the internet globally in the modern day. There were 5.16 billion internet users worldwide as of January 2023, accounting for 64.4% of the total population. Social media is reportedly used by 59.4% of these individuals [1]. Consequently, it is imperative to comprehend the quickly expanding digital footprint. Digital footprints are the data trails created and stored by using various online avenues.

Digital footprints include logins, bookmarks, website visits, geolocation, postings, ratings, purchases, and sharing. This trail can be traced back to the end-users. It is possible to identify and collect information about individuals based on their digital footprints. This information can include personal data such as name, location, age, interests, and more. The use of computers has crept into every aspect of our lives and is now a necessary component of every activity for everyone from individuals (gaming, correspondence, watching videos, information searching), to legal entities (electronic document flow within organizations, interactions with banks and regulatory authorities, report submission, application submission), and public authorities (e.g., the Russian portal "Government Services").

Through online communities and networks, social media users are able to partake in virtual social interactions by exchanging information and ideas. One of the most important facets of social media is the crowd's involvement as an engaged consumer who participates in the material. Examples of social media encompass blogs and microblogging on Twitter, social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn, and media sharing websites like YouTube, Flickr, and Instagram. Modern consumers find it easier and more frequent to access social media thanks to the widespread use of digital technology like laptops and mobile phones, which has greatly accelerated the prevalence of social media. In the contemporary digital landscape, individuals are progressively disclosing an unprecedented amount of personal information on online platforms, including but not limited to their geographical locations, contact particulars and even sensitive data such as credit card numbers, all of which contribute to the formation of what is commonly termed a "digital footprint." This expanding digital dossier has unfortunately ushered in a new era where individuals are facing tangible consequences, such as termination of employment or exclusion from educational opportunities, due to the content discernible on their social media profiles. This predicament arises primarily from a lack of awareness among internet users regarding the latent

ramifications of their online engagements and the inadvertent dissemination of their personal data. One way that digital footprint is left behind according to the Internet Society is through retailers who leave cookies in a user system to track the user's activities [2]. Subsequently, these digital footprints become susceptible to exploitation by external entities for commercial gain or exploitative purposes. Compounding this issue is the formidable challenge of eradicating digital footprints once they have been established, as the shared information permeates the online sphere, rendering it persistently accessible and potentially vulnerable to exploitation and misuse.

The media often presents the internet as a technology that has wrought havoc upon the lives of the younger generation. It frequently emphasizes narratives concerning youth ensnared in internet addiction, the ominous presence of online predators preying on minors, the destructive impact of cyberbullying and the perilous realm of teenage sexual behaviors. Furthermore, media coverage extends to encompassing issues such as fraudulent activities related to online product purchases, the psychological toll of social media-induced depression, instances of sexual harassment and the inadvertent exposure of inappropriate content. Moreover, the notion of a digital footprint can be construed as a form of tacit engagement by netizens, manifested through the creation and dissemination of content across various social media platforms.

Theoretical Framework

Many digital footprints allow them to be classified. It is customary to distinguish two types of digital traces: active and passive [3].

An active digital footprint materializes through the deliberate dissemination of user-generated information across the vast expanse of the internet, notably on social networking sites. Sending an email to someone (you want them to see it) is an example of leaving an active footprint. Other examples include writing blog posts, publishing on social media sites like LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram, and completing forms that ask for email or text update subscriptions. The size of the digital footprint increases with the number of emails sent. Emails could live several years or more because the majority of people save them online.

On the other hand, a passive footprint is described as inadvertent or unconscious marks that a person makes online. Instances of this phenomenon include the utilization of applications and websites employing geolocation services to ascertain a user's precise whereabouts, as well as activities such as browsing products and participating in online engagements, which advertisers aggregate and scrutinize to construct a detailed user profile. Subsequently, this data is leveraged to deliver tailored advertisements tailored to individual preferences and behaviors [4]. A user's unintentionally left-over data trail or information path on the internet is also referred to as a passive digital footprint. For instance, the IP address can access the web server when the user accesses a website. The internet service provider and the user's general location are later identified by this address. IP addresses are nevertheless a part of users' digital footprints even though they are subject to change and do not contain any personal information. Some search engines record search history when the user logs in and these histories are called as more specific elements of passive digital footprints [5].

In addition to active and passive digital footprint types, we encounter following subcategories in literature [4, 6, 7]. These are:

- a) Personally identifiable information: Contains information related to real names of individuals.
- b) Anonymous: Contains anonymous data. This type of digital footprint hides IP address.
- c) User input: Contains the data created as a result of user input.
- d) Sensor data: These are the data created with the help of sensors.

Whether on purpose or accidentally, users often leave behind digital traces that can be actively or passively collected by interested parties. Because digital information is so large and diversified, it can be comparatively straightforward to gather a significant amount of user data via automated procedures or basic search engine queries.

According to a 2017 study by Katalin Feher, which examined how individuals share information online, only 70% of this material is still under their control, with the other 30% being vulnerable to unauthorized usage and even illegal activity [8]. The crisis surrounding Cambridge Analytica provides a striking example of the significant influence that digital traces have on modern culture. Through social media, people might manipulate data and raise issues without authorization. Digital footprints allow for study, analysis and comparisons without the owner's permission by providing insights on people's locations, affiliations, interests, and points of view. Although these imprints are not intrinsically bad, they must be carefully managed to preserve a favorable online persona, especially in light of employer monitoring and potential consequences for career advancement [9].

Being an effective digital citizen requires being aware of the consequences of one's digital footprint and using online spaces properly. Understanding one's digital footprint is essential for media literacy and adjusting to the digital age, since people need to take proactive measures to control their online presence in order to avoid problems down the road. One of the main requirements for practicing good digital citizenship is to use one's internet footprints responsibly in order to reduce potential future complications. This is when the idea of being aware of one's digital footprint becomes prominent. Becoming aware of one's digital footprint is essential for becoming media literate, adapting to modern culture, developing technical (also called digital literacy) and cognitive capacities (capacity to acquire information and understand the ramifications of online activities). People are expected to be aware of their digital footprints in order to control them. However, not all digital footprints are positive, and they may not leave positive footprints. For that reason, managing one's digital footprint has become crucial to maintaining a positive digital identity. Since today's employers use digital footprints to monitor the activities of their employees online, the management of digital footprints has become essential. In order to manage digital footprints, one must be a competent online media user. People who spend time on the Internet, that connect through one or more technological devices and whose social environment, family, etc. connect with each other in digital spaces are called digital citizens.

One of the biggest requirements for digital citizenship is minimizing the problems that may occur in future by using the footprints in online environments properly. At this point, the concept of digital footprint awareness comes to the fore. For one to be media literate, adapt to modern society, develop technical (sometimes referred to as digital literacy) and cognitive abilities (ability to gather information and comprehend the implications of online activities), one must be conscious of one's digital footprint. In order to manage their digital footprints, people are supposed to be aware of them.

Conclusion

The integration of digital information and its associated footprints into society is undeniable, constituting an essential facet. These elements offer profound research prospects by enhancing efficiency and expanding the scope of available information. Complete absence of digital footprints is nearly unattainable in today's digitally driven era, given the ubiquitous nature of online engagement.

Anticipated trends suggest that terms like digital footprint management and digital heritage will gain prominence, necessitating a legal framework to govern these domains. This evolution is poised to reshape academic studies, with a new professional role of digital curators likely to emerge distinctly. Furthermore, as our digitalized world undergoes rapid socio-economic transformations, there's an anticipation of a surge in academic inquiries into digital footprint management, accompanied by novel employment avenues within the private sector focusing on this domain.

In essence, while this study aims to heighten awareness regarding digital footprint management, the responsibility for managing one's digital footprints and addressing privacy concerns ultimately lies with the users themselves.

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