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## The Role of Technology and Consumer Empowerment

The softening economy has already caused venture capital funds to dry up and created a rash of layoffs among IT start-ups that are working hard to carve a niche in the e-commerce sector. Burdening these entrepreneurs with more laws would squeeze out many hundreds of smart people with sound business models.

Using rich technology and empowering consumers), in addition to sound public policy is perhaps the most effective way to protect online privacy. There are products available to assist them in protecting their online experience. For example, Microsoft offers "Kids Passport" which is a service that helps you conveniently protect and control your children's online privacy. You can control what information children can share with participating Web sites, and what those sites can do with that information. In addition, you have the flexibility of making specific choices for each child and for each site, all in one convenient, centralized location.

One of the most interesting technologies coming down the pike is the platform for privacy preferences (P3P), which is an extension of some of the technology that exists today. Sponsored by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), P3P is a framework for products and practices that will let World Wide Web users control the amount of personal information they share with Web sites. It's described as a "privacy assistant." Using a P3P application, a user can enter appropriate personal information once and not have to repeatedly reenter it at different Web sites. The P3P application can inform the user of a Web site's practices with regard to gathering and reusing its visitors' personal information. Consumers will thus be able to limit the information that a specific site can obtain.

There are software products on the market that allow you to generate a privacy policy that can be read by a browser as well as one which can be read by humans. It is therefore very easy to participate in the P3P movement and become a good actor on the Net. Once the standards have ironed themselves out, it will be possible for a browser to detect the privacy policy of the site you are about to visit and compare it to the preferences you have set. The browser can then warn you of a difference and help you to decide what sort of information you should and shouldn't share with the site. Sometimes, it's just this sort of friendly reminder that is all that is needed to help consumers remain conscious of this issue and protect their information accordingly.

ACT advocates a third prong to our online privacy position, which perhaps is the most important one \_ consumer education and empowerment. Industry must do its part to provide the necessary tools and information to consumers so they feel educated and empowered when using the Internet.