

Your Phone Number is Not Only Yours

For many people, a phone does a lot more than just allow us to make and receive voice calls. A phone is in fact a powerful pocket computer. A device we depend on every day and carry with us all the time. A phone is often the single device we use to interact with others. It has also become the most significant virtual window to the rich and colourful world out there, both digital and physical. But it doesn't just allow us to look out, it also allows others to peer in at us.

Your location can be easily pinpointed by your phone because each phone has its own unique identifiers. Some of these IDs belong to the device, such as its serial number, but there are more. Some of them can be transferred between devices, for example when we swap our SIM cards. But what about another identifier, our phone number? How important is it in determining who we are? We decided to find out.

With the help of researchers from India, we looked at how different people use their smartphones. What services and apps they use, and if they share phone numbers with them. And if so, how often? And for what purposes?

What we learned is that a phone number is an essential key to being able to access most services and apps. It's required during registration, sign ups, to enable better security, or to verify who we are. In fact without it, users wouldn't be able to join or use most of the important services they need. It turns out that our phone number is as essential as our name or address. In fact we share it more often.

What happens to these numbers when we use them to sign up for services? Are they used for other purposes? Do these companies and services share them with any third parties? Researchers looked at that too. By analysing tens of terms and conditions and policies of these services. What we found out is that our device's phone number, besides being a number that one can call, is a special, unique identifier that can travel between our devices and activities.

Our phone number verifies that a specific digital identity and behaviours are ours. Not only in the digital space, but also in the physical one. A phone number is special because it often stays with us, even if we change our phone or our SIM card. Once it's collected, our phone number is shared and traded with other entities, direct subsidiaries, business affiliates and service providers, as well as external parties like advertisers and government agencies. This makes it one of the most important fingerprints of the digital era.

How long have you had your current phone number for? Do you know how many companies have it? How much does your phone number reveal about you?