

## Is Privacy Obsolete?

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We are told that the surveillance society is here to stay, and we just have to get used to it. What's more, this is a good thing, because openness and transparency are healthy. Members of the younger generation know this instinctively and consequently don't care about privacy. They eagerly display their personal lives on social networking sites, and if someone out there records their every mouse click and iPhone text, so much the better. They like the individually tailored information and ads.

Besides, privacy can't be an essential part of our humanity, because there are cultures in which it doesn't exist. Some people live in close quarters with other families in a single dwelling and have intimate knowledge of each other's affairs. If they don't need privacy, why do we?

Constant surveillance is undeniably a fact of modern life. Internet service providers record every website we visit, smart phones relay our locations to the nearest antenna, ubiquitous video cameras peer at us, and retailers record every purchase and track our movements as we shop. License-plate readers follow our cars, smart TVs register what we are watching (and will soon watch *us*), and who knows what the NSA is doing. All the while, sophisticated data mining algorithms prowl social networks and data bases to assemble dossiers on countless individuals.

Maybe we should step back and think about the ethics of all this. Is privacy really optional? Is it really OK for marketing firms and the government to monitor our lives? Do philosophers and ethical thinkers have anything to say about it?

Let's start with the attitudes of young people. They love to post Facebook selfies, but anyone who thinks adolescents don't care about privacy should try walking into a teenage son or daughter's room unannounced. In fact, many are fleeing from Facebook to other platforms because their parents are on Facebook. According to a May 2013 report by the Pew Internet and American Life project, most teens are careful about privacy settings, routinely delete old posts, and use code language to disguise the true meaning of their messages. They clearly care about privacy when they see an immediate impact on their lives—and sometimes when they don't. A June 2013 poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that young people actually place more weight on privacy, relative to national security, than older generations.

Anthropologists tell us that every society on earth respects privacy, albeit in different ways. People who live in close quarters, for example, have any number of mechanisms to secure privacy. They may have a secluded retreat in the woods from which others keep their distance. Certain buildings may be forbidden to women or men. Families may take care not to intrude on another family's space in a

common dwelling, and partitions may be erected at sensitive times like childbirth. There may be strict taboos about asking personal questions, and people may lie on a regular basis to avoid revealing personal information.

Part of the explanation for this is that privacy affords a zone of trust and safety within which intimacy can develop, and intimacy is necessary for family life and therefore survival. Yet many philosophers see a deeper explanation: the connection between privacy and autonomy, which is the capacity for self-determination. These philosophers argue that part of being human is having a certain amount of control over our lives, which requires some kind of personal space where we are in charge.

What if our minds were constantly open to scrutiny by strangers? We would be self-conscious about every thought, and it would be impossible for us to be ourselves. We would become objects manipulated by others rather than autonomous beings. It would be the same if our bodies were constantly exposed, or if our personal space were open for the curious to invade anytime. We all need a sanctuary within which we can safely be who we are, not only for psychological health, but because having a self is part of what it means to be human.

Nowadays, we live much of our lives in the electronic infosphere that permeates our environment. Yet there is no private space in this infosphere. It may feel private at first, particularly to teens alone with their phones or adults who are unaware of pervasive surveillance. But as we become more aware of it, we must somehow carve out private space, if necessary by shutting down the phone and the tablet.

As we increasingly transfer our lives to the infosphere, we make available a wealth of data that can be put to good use as well as ill. Yet we must have areas that are safe from prying eyes, not only to avoid identity theft and other harms, but to safeguard our autonomy. This is the ethical challenge in our age of surveillance.