

Personal Privacy: Does It Even Matter Anymore?

What is privacy? According to Merriam-Webster, privacy is the quality or state of being apart from company or observation; freedom from unauthorized intrusion. Historically, privacy has been one of the most inherent and most valued components of the human experience. We intuitively know it to be so from a young age, when we gain the realization that what's in our heads stays in our heads until we choose to express it.

Our innate understanding of privacy, and the immense value we put on it, helps to form how we view, experience, and understand the world around us. Even our very understanding of the world is a private matter for us, unless of course we express it through conversation, art, etc... or at least, we believe that to be the case. However, for those trained in human behavior, in linguistics, in psychology, for those who understand how to read us, then many of our actions, mannerisms, and even choice of words betray our private world view.

I say all this because I believe it helps to illustrate a quality of humanity which governments rely on. You see, privacy matters to us, but it only takes the illusion of privacy to maintain a civil society. Bruce Schneier says that "Privacy is what allows us to act appropriately in whatever setting we find ourselves. In the privacy of our home or bedroom, we can relax in a way that we can't when someone else is around." With this statement, Bruce makes the

argument that human beings need private moments to fully realize who they are, achieve self-actualization in a sense. Throughout our daily lives, we wear many masks, acting in ways we believe appropriate to the variety of situations we find ourselves in, keeping our true selves hidden, private. It is in those moments of privacy when our true selves can come out, when we reconnect with who we are without the mask. These are personal and intimate moments, without which we begin to lose grasp of our individuality.

While I won't speak long on this, we can see the impact of the loss of these moments in Orwell's 1984. In it, Big Brother utilizes the loss of private moments as one of many methods of eroding at the individuality of the public. When an individual knows they are being watched, much as with Brennan's Panopticon, he ultimately becomes his own prison guard. Through the constant surveillance, Big Brother maintains the public's loyalty and subservience. I believe that it is through the constant surveillance that all the other methods used by the Oceania government to maintain power become fruitful, as without them, people would have those moments to explore their individuality, and from them, resentment and rebellion would be birthed.

Bruce goes on to say that "Privacy is an inherent human right, and a requirement for maintaining the human condition with dignity and respect. It is about choice, and having the power to control how you present yourself to the world." Now, there are a lot of things to unpack with this statement, more than I can give adequate attention to in a short position paper. On a certain level, I completely agree with Bruce. We know privacy to be a true thing early in life, and on the surface, it is required to maintain our dignity, as well as both self-respect

and respect for others. Privacy is required if we wish to have the choice over who the world perceives us to be.

Is it, though? As I've mentioned, individuals with the proper training can glean quite a lot of information about us from the choices we make, our mannerisms, the words we use, the ideas we express, how they are expressed, and how they flow from one to the next. We betray our private selves with every action we take and every word we utter. I know this well, as I've developed a pretty keen ability to read people based on the things mentioned above as a coping mechanism for my deficiencies from neurodivergence and the "trauma" they've caused (though I really do hate this use of the word due to the connotations attached to it). While reading people like this rarely provides factual data, it does give enough information to intuit much about a person which they try to keep hidden.

So, to the average person, privacy matters, though it is an illusion of privacy we operate under, even without considering the impact of technology. However, when you add technology into the equation, the vulnerability of our privacy becomes readily apparent, as does the cognitive dissonance we rely on to get through our days. As valuable as privacy is to us, it is only valuable situationally.

We don't care all that much about our privacy when we use search engines, revealing some of our deepest and darkest secrets and desires to the search provider. In these moments, our desire to fulfill a sexual vice, or to discover a remedy for an embarrassing condition, or to find advice for an incriminating situation, these things take precedence over the privacy we would otherwise give these very queries. We sacrifice our privacy in those moments because

we believe we are getting something more valuable in return, though few rarely understand this consciously.

The same can be said for our interactions with social media. Platforms like Facebook and Instagram are breeding grounds for a new variety of widespread narcissism, where the dopamine rush we get from every view and like serves to drive the development of ADHD-like symptoms in adults, leading to a lack of impulse control and poor attention. We put our entire lives on display on these platforms for friends and strangers alike to experience. Sure, it could be argued that we only share what we choose to share and most of our lives are kept private, but as I had implied earlier, we typically say much more in everything we do, say, and share than we had ever intended to. What information about us can be gleaned from the things we choose to share on social media?

We operate under the illusion of privacy, and that appears to be enough for us. We feel as though we've maintained our dignity and self-respect, and we have not lost respect for individuals in our lives, though perhaps we've lost some for the greater society. Yet, it seems that the benefits of surveillance for governments have not been sacrificed in the process. We feel like we've maintained our individuality, but how many are enslaved to what's socially acceptable? How many give in to the fear of being cancelled and alter their beliefs to be more socially acceptable, even if said beliefs fly in the face of objective reality?

The argument for privacy becomes weaker every year as we watch technology develop. We give it up freely in exchange for services that enhance our quality of life and provide entertainment. If this is the case, can we say we have any moral position to argue for privacy

rights? Are privacy rights even real? This is another point I wish I could spend more time on, as the concept of “rights” is laughable once understood logically. A right is an abstract concept, a social construction, but rights do not exist external to the human mind. A person’s right to privacy is nothing more than an entitlement granted by an enforcement mechanism which has willed it to be so, and as such can be taken away when deemed necessary.

The argument “If you aren’t doing anything wrong, then you have nothing to hide,” I think becomes negated by what I’ve discussed so far. While on principle, I would say this is a dangerous statement which provides governments an excuse to overexert their authority beyond what is acceptable, I must wonder if the argument is nothing but a red herring. It is obvious that we feel as though we value privacy, and the above argument acts as a difficult-to-argue-against statement facilitating mass surveillance, but does it really matter when we so flagrantly sacrifice our privacy for personal gain?

I feel as though this week’s attempt at writing comes off as a little nebulous and without providing a firm position, even more so than my previous writings, and this bothers me a little. I have held strong pro-privacy positions for much of my life, and feel as though I still do. But I have begun to give my positions a critical analysis and am left with something resembling a solemn resignation. With the understanding of how valuable our data has become and how reliant our nation is and will continue to be on it to maintain economic dominance, combined with the demotivating realization that people don’t really care about what they say they care about, their words spoken for appearance’s sake, while they give up their privacy in ways that Big Brother had to redesign social norms through extreme authoritarian methods to achieve... I’m left torn.

Is this what it feels like to realize Palpatine was right? Is this how it feels to join the Empire? Every week, I have come to question principles and beliefs I've held onto strongly for most of my life. Is this new world we find ourselves in compatible with the moral foundations I've put so much effort into building? Did Big Brother act in unethical ways to maintain power? Was Palpatine right? Is the argument that peace and prosperity hold a higher value than privacy and individualism a correct one?

I think about the sacrifice made by Snowden to alert the public to what was going on, and I am beginning to wonder if it was all in vain. Ultimately, we don't value privacy anymore as a species, only the illusion of privacy. The benefits outweigh the costs for most, and I am further convinced that we are living in the dystopian nightmare, voluntarily, that our predecessors tried so hard to warn us about.

Sources:

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