

**AUGUST 2010**

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**PRIVACY  
ONLINE**

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**DEBATING MATTERS  
TOPIC  
GUIDES**

[www.debatingmatters.com](http://www.debatingmatters.com)

**MOTION:**

**“WE SHOULD NOT  
EXPECT OUR ONLINE  
ACTIVITIES TO  
REMAIN PRIVATE”**

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## KEY TERMS

[Cyber security](#)

[Data sharing](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Privacy policies](#)

# INTRODUCTION

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# NOTES

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We use the internet for an increasing variety of purposes: reading news; paying bills; sharing photos; watching television and much more. And not only do our own computers record information about all of these activities, but we leave a trail on other computers too [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)]. Much of the time we don't even think about this and imagine that what we do online is our own business. But this information trail can have a number of important consequences. First of all, if we are careless with sensitive information like credit card numbers, we can suffer fraud or even identity theft [Ref: [Identity Theft](#)]. Similarly, any pictures or comments we post on social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook can all too easily end up being seen by people we'd rather not see them [Ref: [All Facebook](#)]. Even if we are careful with our privacy settings and deal only with reputable websites and companies, information about our activities is out of our control. Social networking sites actually own the information posted by users, while internet service providers and search engines routinely gather information for commercial purposes [Ref: [Techradar.com](#)]. Debates continue to rage about the scope of Google's data collection; from the launch of its Street View service in 2009 [Ref: [Guardian](#)], to the recent revelations that the Street View cars had mistakenly gathered personal data from Wi-Fi in the areas they were photographing [Ref: [Independent](#)]. Eric Schmidt, the chief executive of Google, has gone so far as to suggest that so much personal information is left on the internet that many people will one day be forced to change their names in order to escape their cyber past [Ref: [Independent](#)].

If we use the internet at work or school the management is



**PRIVACY ONLINE:**

**“We should not expect our online activities to remain private”**



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## INTRODUCTION CONTINUED...

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generally entitled to monitor what we look at [Ref: [Privacy Rights Clearinghouse](#)]. And governments can require internet service providers to hand over information about individuals' internet use if they believe they are involved in crime, not least terrorism. The UK government recently created a new unit, the Communications Capabilities Directorate, to implement the controversial Interception Modernisation Programme, maintaining huge databases of people's online activity [Ref: [The Register](#)]. Many internet users are therefore concerned that both private companies and governments gather far too much information about our online activities. Privacy advocates and campaigners argue that we should not give up lightly on the idea that we retain control of who knows what about our online activities [Ref: [Privacy International](#)].



### What are the arguments in the online privacy debate?

Secure software systems mean it is now generally safe to make financial transactions online, whether buying books or selling shares, while encryption and other security software is available for those with particular privacy concerns [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)]. But the question of whether we should expect privacy is not merely a technical one. Those who argue that online privacy is unrealistic believe that the very nature of how we use the internet today makes old-fashioned privacy concerns irrelevant or even undesirable [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Irrelevant because the internet is all about sharing, not concealing – and if we are really concerned about keeping something private, we shouldn't put it online in the first place [Ref: [web.tech.law](#)]. It is also considered undesirable because the benefits of privacy are outweighed by those of convenience [Ref: [Visual Revenue](#)] and security [Ref: [cnet.com](#)] if we trust internet companies and government agencies with our information. Privacy advocates counter that whatever the technical difficulties, people are entitled to use the internet without surrendering personal information to private companies or governments, however benign [Ref: [Wired](#)]. The philosopher Julian Baggini suggests that the 'willing surrender of privacy' online raises fundamental questions about the meaning of autonomy and individuality in today's world [Ref: [Independent](#)]. Controversies about whether internet companies should collaborate with the authoritarian regime in China, meanwhile, remind us that there can be a dark side to state supervision [Ref: [AsiaNews.it](#)].

### Trading privacy for convenience?

There are undoubtedly benefits to surrendering a degree of privacy online, for example, by accepting tracking 'cookies' from websites

we visit [Ref: [Visual Revenue](#)]. If we trust internet companies with our address and credit card details, we can pay for books, flights and other services at the click of a mouse. Users of social networking sites get to use these sophisticated applications free of charge to stay in touch with friends, share articles and pictures and chat online [Ref: [Social Networking](#)]. While some people object to companies retaining information about things they read and buy online, others like the fact that web applications can then tailor adverts to their interests rather than annoying them with a scattergun approach [Ref: [e-Web Marketing](#)]. There is also the potential for greater speed and efficiency in everything from paying tax to accessing health services if we allow the relevant agencies to store and share information about us. More generally, some argue that the culture is simply changing, and that, in the words of Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, 'privacy is no longer a social norm', [Ref: [Guardian](#)] especially for younger people who have grown up with the internet and are much more comfortable sharing pictures and so on [Ref: [Wired](#)]. On the downside, the more personal information we share online, the greater the chance it will be abused by criminals or unscrupulous companies. Critics argue that any move away from valuing privacy is a worrying cultural trend, since a degree of privacy is essential both to civil liberties and personal well-being, and that young people do value privacy even if they behave differently from older generations [Ref: [NPR](#)].

### Trading privacy for security?

There have long been concerns that the internet can be used by terrorist groups to recruit new members, raise money and plan attacks, and some argue this means we must be prepared to sacrifice some privacy [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)]. Security agencies have even



been monitoring applications like Second Life for signs of terrorist activity. A paper by the US government's Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity group argued that, 'What started out as a benign environment where people would congregate to share information or explore fantasy worlds is now offering the opportunity for religious/political extremists to recruit, rehearse, transfer money, and ultimately engage in information warfare or worse with impunity' [Ref: [Washington Post](#)]. In this context, it is argued that we should all be willing to give up a little privacy so that security agencies can keep an eye on suspicious online behaviour. The controversial Regulation of Investigatory Powers (RIP) Act (2000) in the UK [Ref: [Guardian](#)], and the Patriot Act (2001) in the USA, have given the state much wider surveillance powers, with considerable implications for online privacy [Ref: [Electronic Privacy Information Centre](#)]. Critics counter that the scope for terrorist activity online is overblown, and little more than an excuse for governments to snoop on ordinary citizens. Juan Cole argues in Salon that, 'Any monitoring by law enforcement of innocuous activity and communication in a virtual world, conducted broadly and without oversight, would be unconstitutional and could invade the privacy of millions of persons. I found no evidence based on my own observations that a virtual world is suitable for planning a terror operation' [Ref: [Salon](#)].

### So does privacy still matter?

Despite the purported benefits of giving up a degree of privacy, many internet users remain instinctively hostile to the idea that companies and government agencies can track their online activities. They point out that just because the internet makes it easier to store and share data, that doesn't mean we have to

go along with it. If we do accept it, it should be because we are convinced of the benefits. Telecoms expert Norman Lewis suggests what really matters is trust: if we genuinely trust companies with our data, that is very different from if they just assume we do [Ref: [Battle of Ideas](#)]. An important question, then, is whether we are asked to opt into a system in which our data will be stored or shared so we can reap benefits, or whether companies simply go ahead and do it for their own benefit. Similarly, privacy advocates protest that governments have not convinced them of the need to compromise privacy for national security [Ref: [Salon](#)]. Even if surrendering it would help the security services, they argue privacy remains an important consideration in itself. While the age-old argument against privacy is that 'if we have nothing to hide we have nothing to fear', critics like law professor John Fitzpatrick argue that in a free society we all have the right to keep secrets [Ref: [Institute of Ideas](#)]. Just as the privacy of the voting booth is essential to democratic elections, a wider private sphere within which to think, debate and reflect beyond prying eyes is essential to democracy more generally. Like other civil libertarians, security technologist Bruce Schneier argues the real choice is not between privacy and security but liberty versus control, because if we are constantly under surveillance, we are constantly fearful and self-conscious, and not able to act freely [Ref: [Wired](#)]. So while it might be difficult to maintain an expectation of privacy in a wired world, some believe we must do everything in our power not to abandon it [Ref: [Liberty](#)].



## ESSENTIAL READING

Does technology pose a threat to our private life?

Jemima Kiss *Guardian* 21 August 2010

Google and privacy: Is the web giant invading our private lives?

*spiked* August 2010

F.T.C.: Has Internet Gone Beyond Privacy Policies?

*Media Decoder blog, New York Times* 11 January 2010

Rethinking privacy and trust

Norman Lewis *Battles in Print* 20 September 2009

Spying on your email

Henry Porter *Guardian Liberty Central blog* 3 August 2009

Spies' Battleground Turns Virtual

*Washington Post* 6 February 2008

### FOR

Opinion: Nothing New About Privacy Fears

Carolyn Homer *AOL News* 19 August 2010

Privacy is over. Here comes sociality.

Tim Leberecht *cnet news* 19 January 2010

Privacy no longer a social norm, says Facebook founder

*Guardian* 11 January 2010

Fight against terror must mean the end of ordinary people's privacy, says ex-security chief

*Daily Mail* 25 February 2009

### AGAINST

Other people's privacy

Nicholas Carr *Rough Type* 17 January 2010

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Why Facebook is Wrong: Privacy Is Still Important

Marshall Kirkpatrick *ReadWriteWeb* 11 January 2010

'You Have Zero Privacy Anyway—Get Over It'

David Adams *OS News* 11 December 2009

The Eternal Value of Privacy

Bruce Schneier *Wired* 18 May 2006

### IN DEPTH

Why Facebook and Google hate privacy

Gary Marshall *TechRadar* 10 December 2009

'People looked at me like I was an alien'

Danah Boyd *Guardian* 9 December 2009

Is Online Privacy a Generational Issue?

Heather West *Wired* 1 October 2009

Two-Thirds of Americans Object to Online Tracking

*New York Times* 29 September 2009

Technology shouldn't give Big Brother a head start

Bruce Schneier *MPR News* 31 July 2009

Teens Take Advantage of Online Privacy Tools

*NPR* 3 April 2008

US seeks terrorists in web worlds

*BBC News* 3 March 2008

Osama bin Laden's "Second Life"

Juan Cole *Salon* 25 February 2008

Virtual terrorists

*The Australian* 31 July 2007



# BACKGROUNDERS

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Data matching: a threat to privacy?

James Welch *Guardian* 23 November 2009

Facebook should compete on privacy, not hide it away

Bruce Schneier *Guardian* 15 July 2009

Politicians Overreacted To Terrorist 'Threat' Online

*Techdirt* 12 March 2009

The Horrifying Dangers Of Online "Cartoon-Like Personas"

Tim Jones *Electronic Frontier Foundation* 6 February 2008

EU Privacy Czar Claims Right to Prohibit US Access to EU Financial Records

Jonathan Winer *Counterterrorism blog* 1 February 2007

Cookie Survey Results - Convenience outweighs most of the worries

Emer Kirrane *VisualRevenue*

Facebook's privacy policy

## ORGANISATIONS

American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom

Becoming paranoid, a weblog about computer security, privacy and staying safe online

Google Privacy Centre

Privacy International

Shut your Facebook

What is Identity theft?



## IN THE NEWS

Facebook Places location tool unveiled, sparking fresh privacy concerns

*Guardian* 19 August 2010

Google chief: My fears for Generation Facebook

*Independent* 18 August 2010

Internet Proposal From Google and Verizon Raises Fears for Privacy

*New York Times* 15 August 2010

Facebook extends privacy controls to mobile

*Daily Telegraph* 4 August 2010

Microsoft Quashed Effort To Boost Online Privacy

*Wall Street Journal* 2 August 2010

UK privacy watchdog clears Google Wi-Fi slurp

*The Register* 29 July 2010

Momentum building for federal online privacy rules

*Washington Post* 28 July 2010

Jumping on Google Over Privacy Does No One Any Good

*Forbes* 27 July 2010

Google tries to soothe fears over privacy

*Independent* 19 May 2010

Home Office spawns new unit to expand internet surveillance

*The Register* 28 January 2010

Cybercriminals revive old scams to target smartphones

*BBC News* 17 January 2010

Google Attack Part of Widespread Spying Effort

*PC World* 13 January 2010

Online health records can save lives

*Guardian* 13 January 2010

Privacy groups file FTC complaint against Facebook

*Guardian* 17 December 2009

Facebook Privacy Changes Go Live; Beware of "Everyone"

*PC World* 9 December 2009

Legislation to access public's texts and emails put on hold

*Guardian* 10 November 2009

How Facebook tried to put a shine on \$9.5m privacy suit

*Guardian Technology Blog* 21 September 2009

Internet firms resist ministers' plan to spy on every e-mail

*The Times* 2 July 2009

Jacqui drops central snooping database

*The Register* 27 April 2009

Government wants phone and internet providers to track users

*Guardian* 27 April 2009

The Wrap: Controversy over Google's new street service

*Guardian* 20 March 2009

Virgin sacks 13 over Facebook 'chav' remarks

*Guardian* 1 November 2008

Sun on Privacy: 'Get Over It'

*Wired* 26 January 1999

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## ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

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- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
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THINKING DEEPLY  
ABOUT...SOCIAL  
ISSUES”**

**IAN GRANT, CEO, BRITANNICA**

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