

Privacy, censorship, ignorance and the internet

[Wikileaks](#) releases hundreds of thousands more classified US documents this weekend, and my wife and I have recently boogied our way through the American airport “naked scan” process (try googling ‘naked scan youtube’ to get a sample of public backlash against it). So, I have both censorship and privacy on my mind. They belong together. Concerns about privacy and censorship regarding the internet have been debated for more than a decade. All of these concerns are about who should have access to what and about whom, and whether regulation of such access is feasible.

Attempts to censor internet materials have largely been futile. In Australia (where I live) efforts to draft legislation requiring internet service providers to filter content have stalled for more than two years. Indeed, the net has undermined censorship powers over earlier mass communications media such as television. On grounds that it could prejudice criminal trials at the time, censorship authorities in the state of Victoria attempted to prevent its residents from watching “Underbelly,” a TV series devoted to gangland wars centered in Melbourne. They discovered to their chagrin that pirated versions of the program could be downloaded from various sources on the net.

How about privacy? Recently Facebook has been taken to task over privacy issues, and not unreasonably, although both Facebook and its users have contributed to those problems. On the users’ side, anyone can be tagged in a personally invasive or offensive photo and before Facebook can remove the photo it may already have been widely distributed or shared. Conventional law does not protect people who are captured by a photograph in public because that doesn’t constitute an invasion of privacy. On Facebook’s part, in 2007 it the [Beacon](#) program was launched whereby user rental records were released in public. Many people regarded this as a breach of privacy, and a lawsuit ensued, resulting in the shutdown of Beacon.

And then there was [Kate’s party](#). Unbeknown to Kate Miller, an invitation to a party at her apartment was sent out on facebook. After prankster David Thorne posted the link on Twitter, people started RSVP’ing. After just one night, when it was taken down by Facebook, 60,000 people had said they were coming with a further 180,000 unconfirmed invitees. According to Thorne, this hoax was motivated by a desire to point out problems with privacy on Facebook and Twitter.

A cluster of concerns boils down to a dual use dilemma of the kind I described in an [earlier post](#). The same characteristics of the net that defeat secrecy or censorship and democratize self-expression also can be used to invade privacy, steal identities, and pirate intellectual property or copyright material. For example, cookies are a common concern in the field of privacy, especially tracking cookies. Although most website developers use cookies for legitimate technical purposes, the potential for abuse is there. General concerns regarding Internet user privacy have become sufficient for a UN agency to issue a report on the dangers of identity fraud.

The chief dividing-line in debates about privacy and censorship is whether privacy is an absolute right or a negotiable privilege. Security expert Bruce Schneier's [2006](#) essay on privacy weighs in on the side of privacy as a right. He points out that anti-privacy arguments such as "if you're doing nothing wrong you have nothing to hide" assume that privacy is in the service of concealing wrongs. But love-making, diary-keeping, and intimate conversations are not examples of wrongdoings, and they indicate that privacy is a basic need.

Contrast this view with Google CEO Eric Schmidt's vision of the future, in which children change their names at adulthood to escape embarrassing online dossiers of the kind compiled by Google. In a [2010](#) interview with him, *Wall Street Journal* columnist Holman Jenkins, Jr. records Mr. Schmidt predicting, "apparently seriously, that every young person one day will be entitled automatically to change his or her name on reaching adulthood in order to disown youthful hijinks stored on their friends' social media sites." Mr. Schmidt goes on to opine that regulation of privacy isn't needed because users right will abandon Google if it does anything "creepy" with their personal information. Among the more amusing comments posted in response, one respondent noted that Mr. Schmidt has blocked the Google Street-View images of his own holiday home on Nantucket.

Back to *Wall Street Journal* columnist Jenkins' interview with the Google CEO: "Mr. Schmidt is surely right, though, that the questions go far beyond Google. 'I don't believe society understands what happens when everything is available, knowable and recorded by everyone all the time,' he says." This goes to the heart of the matter, and Joe and Jane Public aren't the only ones who don't understand this.

Theories and research about human communication have largely been hobbled by a default assumption is that miscommunication or misunderstanding is aberrant and should be eliminated. For example, the overwhelming emphasis is on studying how to detect deception rather than investigating how it is constituted and the important roles it plays in social interaction. Likewise, the literature on miscommunication is redolent in negative metaphors, with mechanistic terms like "breakdowns," "disrepair;" and "distortion;" critical-theoretic terms such as "disadvantage," "denial," and "oppression." In the human relations school "unshared" and "closed" communications carry with them moral opprobrium. So these perspectives are blind to the benefits of unshared communication such as privacy.

Some experts from other domains concur. Steve Rambam famously [declares](#) that "Privacy is dead. Get over it." David Brin claims (in his [rebuttal](#) to a critique of his book, *The Transparent Society*) that "we already live in the openness experiment, and have for 200 years." The implicit inference from all this is that if only we communicated fully and honestly with one another, all would go well.

Really?

Let's cut to the chase. Imagine that all of us—ZAP!—are suddenly granted telepathy. Each of us has instant access to the innermost thoughts and feelings of our nearest and dearest, our bosses, subordinates, friends, neighbors, acquaintances and perfect strangers. The ideal of noise-free, transparent, totally honest communication finally is achieved. Forget the internet—Now there *really* is no such thing as privacy anymore. What would the consequences be?

In the short term, cataclysmic. Many personal relationships, organizations, governments, and international relations would fall (or be torn) apart. There would be some pleasant surprises, yes, but I claim there would be many more negative ones, for two reasons. First, we have a nearly universal tendency to self-bolster by deluding ourselves somewhat about how positively others regard us. Second, many of us would be outraged at finding out how extensively we've been hoodwinked by others, not just those with power over us but also our friends and allies. Look at who American governmental spokespeople tried to forewarn and preempt about the Wikileaks release. It wasn't their enemies. It was their friends.

What about the longer term? With the masks torn off and the same information about anyone's thoughts available to everyone, would we all end up on equal footing? As Schneier pointed out in his [2008](#) critique of David Brin's book, those who could hang onto positions of power would find their power greatly enhanced. Knowledge may be power, but it is a greater power for those with more resources to exploit it. It would be child's play to detect any heretic failing to toe the party or corporate line. And the kind of targeted marketing ensuing from this would make today's cookie-tracking efforts look like the fumbling in the dark that they are.

In all but the most benign social settings, there would be no such thing as "free thinking." Yes, censorship and secrecy would perish, but so would privacy and therefore the refuge so poignantly captured by [Die Gedanken Sind Frei](#). The end result would certainly not be universal freedom of thought or expression.

Basic kinds of social interaction would be obliterated and there would be massive cultural upheavals. Lying would become impossible, but so would politeness, tact, and civility. These all rely on potentially face-threatening utterances being softened, distorted, ambiguated, or simply unsaid. Live pretence, play-acting or role-playing of any kind would be impossible. So would most managerial methods. The doctor's "bedside manner" or any professional's mien would become untenable. For example live classroom teaching would be very difficult indeed ("Pay attention, Jones, and stop fantasizing about Laura in the third row." "I will, sir, when you stop fantasizing about her too."). There would be no personas anymore, only personalities.

I said earlier that privacy and censorship belong together. As long as we want one, we'll have to live with the other (and I leave it to you to decide which is "one" and "other"). The question of who should know what about what or whom is a vexing question, and so it should be for anyone with a reasonably sophisticated understanding of the issues involved. And who should settle this question is an even more vexed question. I've raised

only a few of the tradeoffs and dilemmas here. The fact that internet developments have raised some debate about these issues is welcome. But frankly, those debates have barely scratched the surface (and that goes for this post!). Let's hope they continue. We need them.