

Character and . . .

Screen Life

Volume 3 / 2017

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The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.

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The *Character and . . .* Journal is published by the Wendt Center for Character Education at the University of Dubuque in Dubuque, Iowa, and uses parenthetical citations in the style of the 8th edition of the *MLA Handbook*.

This issue is dedicated to Allison Cress, 1998-2017.

Character and Privacy: The Cost of Convenience


Sarah Slaughter

Abstract

From banking and shopping, to connecting with friends and family through email or social media, Americans' daily interactions increasingly happen online. Many of the services we use to accomplish these tasks are available for free, but the convenience of free services often comes with a cost we don't fully appreciate. Consumers are continuously generating data for companies, often with very few opportunities to opt out, and with very little understanding of how that data is collected and used. In this essay I examine the consequences of this omnipresent data collection and consider how we ought to manage our privacy online if we wish to be people of integrity and character.

Would you give up your first-born child in order to join a social networking site? In a 2016 study of privacy policies and user behavior, that's exactly what participants did. The goal of the study was to analyze the terms of service and privacy policy reading behaviors of people joining a fictitious social network. The agreements created for the study included two "gotcha" clauses, intended to be outrageous enough that subjects would express concern after reading them.


One of these clauses stated under "Payment Types" that "in exchange for



98% of respondents missed the clause that took away their rights to their first-born child.

Thinking about Privacy

Attitudes Toward Privacy The low level of engagement with privacy policies could paint the picture of a public that doesn't care about keeping data private. However, studies of people's attitudes toward privacy are sharply at odds with this picture. Americans consistently describe privacy as being important to them and want to be able to control the flow of data about themselves. Per another 2015 Pew Research Center survey, 93% of respondents say it is important to them to control who sees information about them, and 90% think it is important to control what information gets collected. Users' perceptions of sharing data with companies adds another layer to our understanding (Madden and Rainie).



*Privacy is
necessary for
human
flourishing.*

The results of all these studies, when taken together, indicate that individuals have a complicated relationship with privacy. Although they claim it is important, their actions do not always reflect this. The length and complexity of privacy policies are significant barriers which prevent people from acting on their convictions.

The Value of Privacy To understand our obligations toward privacy, first we must understand the role it plays in our lives. People in the Pew Research Center survey rated privacy as an important aspect of their lives, but why do we value it so much? Turning to research in the social sciences and philosophy can help answer this question.

Scholars across multiple disciplines describe privacy as necessary for human flourishing. It is a key factor in psychological well-being, healthy relationships, and a fulfilling inner life. In a 1997 paper D.M. Pedersen investigated how different types of privacy helped satisfy various needs. He found that having time away from others allowed people to take time for contemplation and rejuvenation, and gave them the space to "do their own thing." Other kinds of privacy such as anonymity, reserve, and intimacy with family and friends served functions such as free

audience. This form of privacy is important, as it protects individuals from various types of harms including financial, as in the case of identity theft; emotional, when a friend disseminates information disclosed in confidence; or physical, as when people with ill intentions learn information such as location. However, explaining privacy merely in terms of control does not sufficiently cover the value of privacy.



When we are aware someone may be watching, we are less likely to try new things or explore our interests.

Other important senses of privacy include freedom from interference and observation, the need for solitude, the need for domesticity (being alone with family or close friends), and maintaining a sphere of inviolability around oneself. The need for solitude and domesticity is confirmed by Pedersen's research. The final sense of maintaining a sphere of

inviolability refers to the idea that there are some areas of life that which must be preserved from observation. According to Ramsay,

privacy here is the recognition that no one is to be treated as an object of idle curiosity, an item to be trespassed upon, a mere means to others' goals. . . . People are to be regarded as selves—as centers of awareness and interests who merit such interpersonal attitudes as recognition, respect, reverence and apology in our dealings with them. (290)

In this sense, respecting privacy means respect for personal dignity. Thinking about privacy in this sense captures the discomfort we feel when we discover we have been observed. It's not a lack of control that upsets us, but the feeling that we have been violated. Privacy has value not only because it allows people to control information, but also because it serves important human needs, such as solitude, which allows us to relax and try new things without the stress of observation; time to be alone with family

Respecting privacy means respect for personal dignity.

and friends, which helps maintain those important relationships; and a feeling of security that some spaces are off limits for others.

Problems with Privacy Agreements

Privacy Policies All the online services we use have terms of use which dictate what information users are required to share and how that information will be used. However, several studies have found that users rarely read through these privacy policies, preferring to just click “agree” and proceed immediately to using the service. The 2016 study by Obar and Oeldorf-Hirsch mentioned above found that 74% of individuals joining a fictitious social networking site skipped reading the privacy policy altogether, and for those who did read it, the average time spent reading was only seventy-three seconds (15–16). Most individuals cite the length, complexity, and a lack of time as reasons why they skipped reading the policy (Obar and Oeldorf-Hirsch 23; Plaut and Bartlett 299).

Even if users do spend the time to read a privacy policy in its entirety, the question remains how much of it users will understand. Per a 2015 Pew Research Center survey, 35% of respondents were discouraged by the amount of effort required to understand what would be done with their data, and 38% were confused by the information provided in the privacy policy. Only 50% of respondents were confident they understood what would be done with their data (Rainie).

A 2015 study of privacy policies, conducted by the nonprofit Center for Plain Language, ranked several popular sites in terms of readability. They examined things like organization, sentence structure, word choice, and tone to assess which companies



provided the best presented privacy policy. Google is an example of a company with a readable privacy policy, as of 2015. The authors lauded the document's organization, with helpful headings and bullet points for easy scanning, as well as the use of language. Google's policy averaged a sentence length of 10.1 words and included links to a glossary which provided definitions of legal terms (*Privacy-Policy Analysis* 10–11). In contrast, the companies ranked at the bottom, such as Twitter and Lyft, contained longer, more complex sentences with embedded rather than bulleted lists of examples.

Surveillance Online Privacy plays a complicated and important role in our lives, providing the necessary protections that allow for human flourishing. However, we live in an increasingly surveilled world, and it is more important than ever to make careful choices regarding privacy. How much and what type of privacy individuals require to satisfy their needs varies from person to person and may depend on factors such as personality, social skills, nature of relationships, and cultural background. Regardless of these individual differences, we can say that all people require privacy in some sense or other. As creatures with dignity, we must be able to determine those needs for ourselves and draw our own boundaries.

However, drawing boundaries can be tricky in the online world. We use digital devices and the web for myriad purposes, from catching up on news, to keeping in touch with friends and family, to games and entertainment. Large parts of our lives are lived online and, even when we are careful, all that activity can be tracked.

When we sign up for online services like social networks, email services, online shopping, etc., we are always required to accept the terms of service. These terms and privacy agreements stipulate what other data the company can see and collect. However, there are other ways for companies to track users even without privacy agreements.

The most common form of tracking is cookies, which are files downloaded to your browser that give your computer an ID. These may be used for a variety of purposes, such as saving a password, analytics so the owners of the site can find out what areas get the most activity, or managing advertising.

Cookies can be blocked and deleted, but they are not the only trackers out there. Flash cookies are another variety, which use Adobe's flash plug-in to track users and store information, but they are more invisible to users and cannot be deleted in the same way as cookies. Beacons are small objects on webpages that make a call back to a server when the webpage loads. They can be used to inform advertisers that an ad has been seen. While you may occasionally see a notice that a website uses cookies, flash cookies and beacons can run on webpages without a user's knowledge.

The Difficulty of Opting Out You may now be wondering if there is a way to avoid all this data collection. The answer is you can, but not without a good deal of effort. Princeton University researcher Janet Vertesi tried to answer this question by conducting a personal experiment in which she tried to hide her pregnancy from technologies like cookies, bots, and other data trackers that allow companies to deliver targeted advertising online. Vertesi wanted to find out to what lengths she would have to go to prevent these companies from identifying her as a pregnant woman, a very valuable type of consumer in the marketing world. She needed to avoid any traceable baby-related activity by remaining silent on social media, making purchases using cash or gift cards, and using the Tor browser for any baby related online searching (Vertesi). Using the Tor browser allows you to access the Tor network, which protects anonymity online by encrypting and routing internet traffic through a random chain of different servers ("Tor Project: Overview").

Vertesi discovered that truly opting out was very time consuming, required detailed knowledge of the digital landscape and data harvesting practices, and



was more expensive—she couldn't partake of the price discounts available for store loyalty card holders, since they also collect data on their customers' shopping habits. The experiment also necessitated cooperation from family and friends, because data about you doesn't just come from your own activity, but that of your friends.

In a final twist to the story, Vertesi also realized that activities like making large purchases (such as a stroller) entirely in cash or with multiple gift cards, plus extensive use of the Tor browser painted the picture of someone possibly engaged in illicit or criminal activity. While the goal of the Tor project is simply to protect users from tracking, the anonymity afforded by use of the browser means it is useful to people engaging in criminal activity such as drug deals and child pornography. Because of this association, someone like Vertesi who uses it frequently may draw suspicion from security offices like the NSA.

The kind of effort needed to avoid all surveillance is impractical for most people. Vertesi's story exposes the pervasiveness of data collection in our everyday lives and calls into question the idea that those who take issue with it can simply opt out.

There are some spaces where we have control over how our data is collected and used. Some companies, such as Google, allow users to opt out of targeted advertising or fine tune the types of ads the site shows them. However, these protections only go so far. Google's ad preferences only apply to how Google delivers advertisements, allowing users to select what type of ads they prefer to see. Changing these preferences doesn't appear to affect the data that Google collects about users. It is not possible for users to completely prevent companies from collecting any information.

Furthermore, thinking back to the senses of privacy discussed before, the ability to change preferences for things like targeted advertising only pertains to control over the flow of information. However, companies like Google don't offer options that protect other senses of privacy users care about, such as intimacy with family and friends. Consider Gmail, Google's email service. Gmail falls under the same privacy policy as the rest of Google's products, and thus is vulnerable to the same kind of data collection that occurs on other products.

Ethicist Clifford Christians writes that no technology is neutral. Instead, the technologies we use are imbued with values. Value judgements enter every stage of the process in the creation of technology, from the initial design to its use by the public (Christians). This way of thinking about technology applies to data collection as well.

Similarly, ethicist Julie Cohen makes precisely this point when she challenges the practices of Big Data: “Information is never just information: even pattern identification is informed by values about what makes a pattern and why, and why the pattern in question is worth noting” (1924–1925). The online systems we use are designed with particular ends in mind, and are infused with value judgments.

It is clear from the pervasiveness of online tracking and the lack of flexibility when it comes to opting out that the companies behind the technology do not value privacy the same way we do. In privacy agreements, privacy is treated as a commodity that must be traded in exchange for the convenience of using a particular service. As such, the value of privacy appears to be limited to control over information. However, we have seen that the value of privacy extends far beyond mere control over information.

Privacy is an instrumental good, which allows people to accomplish important ends such as spending time with loved ones, exploring interests and trying new things without fear of judgement, and being themselves. Since the values imbued in the technology we use don't necessarily resonate with our own, we have to seek out ways to use technology that uphold our values.

Privacy and Character

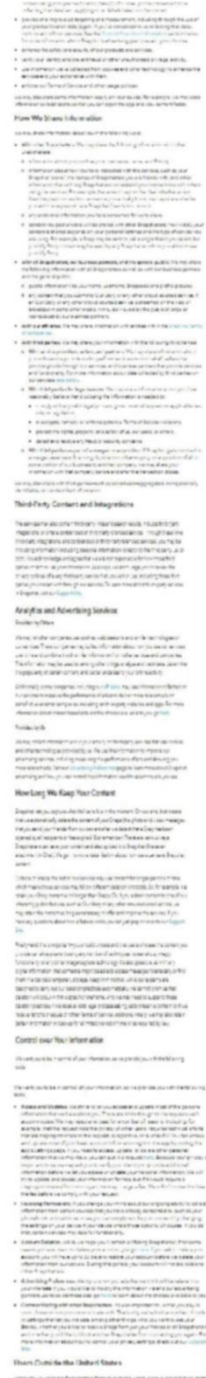
Integrity If we accept that privacy is a basic human need or a human right, individuals must have the power to make careful choices in how they manage it. It is not necessarily a problem that companies collect data from their users, but the trouble comes in when users do not have the tools they need to adequately manage their privacy. As they are currently written, privacy policies do not respect the value of privacy in the lives of users. Policies are difficult to understand, do not give users a genuine choice, and do not provide users with the means to

protect their privacy as it relates to important human needs. Users also need to take greater responsibility in the matter. By not reading privacy policies nor attempting to understand how data will be collected and used, we make ourselves vulnerable to being taken advantage of, and we may compromise our integrity by agreeing to terms inconsistent with our own values.

If we are concerned with our moral character and want to live with integrity, it is imperative that we pay attention to our privacy and make informed decisions with how we regulate it. Living with integrity goes beyond simply being honest. Acting honestly is undoubtedly an important aspect of living with integrity, but it is not the whole picture. In the words of Stephen Carter, integrity “demands a difficult process of discerning one’s deepest understanding of right and wrong, and then further requires action consistent with what one has learned” (10). To be people of integrity, we must reflect on what is right and wrong in a particular situation, and then act in such a way that upholds that judgment.

We have been coaxed into habits that compromise our integrity in the online world. When we click “agree” without understanding the terms of service, or when we unknowingly hand over data we normally consider private, all in the name of convenience, we are not making informed decisions based on our understanding of right and wrong. This has consequences, not just for us, but also for our friends and loved ones.

Integrity means acting in accordance with values we hold dear, such as justice and compassion. Since not only our own information but also that of family and friends is at stake, compassion instructs us to



act in the interest of others rather than just in our own. This means discussing with friends and family how much disclosure is appropriate across various platforms and then respecting those boundaries. Justice calls us to reflect on what is fair in our online dealings, such as transparency from companies regarding how data is to be collected and used.

To be people of strong moral character, we must not allow convenience to take precedence over our values.

Acting with integrity online means understanding the terms and taking steps to address problems where we see them. These steps include utilizing privacy controls and settings to achieve more protection, limiting the use of

online services, or even rejecting certain services altogether. To be people of strong moral character, we must not allow convenience to take precedence over our values.

What to Look for in Privacy Policies You may feel that you would like to do more to protect your privacy, but the problem remains that privacy policies are long and difficult to read. However, there are some key elements that will be addressed in every policy.

1. What information will be collected?

Some sites only need basic pieces of information like your name and some form of contact information, but others will record data on all your activity on the site. If the service allows you to interact with others in some capacity, think about how your activity may affect them.

2. Who can see that information?

Sometimes companies will share information or even sell it to third parties. Oftentimes this is for advertising purposes. Be sure to note also if the site will share information with government agencies.

3. How long will the company store your information?

Some policies state that they will store information for a certain amount of time. Others may store it indefinitely.

4. How does the company keep your information secure?

This covers how the company safeguards your information from parties who may use it to steal your identity or cause some other harm. Make sure the site uses a secure protocol, such as HTTPS (found at the beginning of a web address; may also appear as a closed lock icon)

5. What are your options?

Find out ways you can control all of these elements. You may be allowed to review the information you send, and you may be able to opt out of things like targeted advertising.

Conclusion

As the internet and other digital technologies become more integrated into our everyday lives, we have to face the reality that these technologies also mean increased surveillance. Companies collect vast swaths of data on their users, yet many Americans are unaware of the scope of this collection. Terms of use agreements and privacy policies are a primary source for privacy problems today. Many Americans neglect to read them, usually because they are prohibitively long and complex.

Furthermore, privacy policies cannot protect privacy in some of its most important senses. Companies give users some control over the flow of information but these controls are inadequate for protecting many of the types of privacy we value, such as



freedom to explore interests unobserved and space to interact with family and friends. These types of privacy are essential to human flourishing. Respecting privacy is instrumental in respecting the dignity of persons, so treating privacy as a currency to be traded for convenient services flies in the face of the value of privacy as a human need.

Lacking understanding of the ways in which our data may be collected and used also sets us up for conflicts with our moral character. If we are to live with integrity, as people who value such concepts as justice and compassion, we must be prepared to take actions in accordance with those values. This means that we must take greater responsibility for our online privacy. Understanding how data is collected and used, utilizing controls, and sometimes rejecting privacy agreements all represent actions we may take in order to conduct ourselves with integrity in our online life.

Sarah Slaughter is a Reference and Instruction Librarian at the University Dubuque. Her areas of interest include information literacy pedagogy, critical librarianship, and information ethics. In her time outside the library, she enjoys cooking, knitting, singing, and playing ultimate Frisbee.

Photo credit p. 56: Mary Bryant

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