



Pew Study Shows Bleak Future for Privacy Rights

The Pew Research group released a [report](#) on Thursday on the future of Internet privacy. The report, which details the responses of thousands of experts, does not paint a very bright future for those of us who value privacy. Fifty-five percent of the experts surveyed by the report do not believe that there will be an infrastructure of privacy rights within the next decade. Only 45 percent believe things will get better.



The report is based on what the Pew Research group calls a “canvassing” rather than a poll “because it is not a representative, randomized survey.” Pew reached out to “experts, many of whom play active roles in Internet evolution as technology builders, researchers, managers, policymakers, marketers, and analysts,” and asked them questions about the future of privacy rights in relation to the Internet and the ways people use it. More than 2,500 experts responded. Many of them elaborated on their answers and offered informed opinions of where they see us in 2025 and why they see the future of privacy rights the way they do.

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Even though the opinions are nearly split, many of the experts share the view that “online life is, by nature, quite public.” We have all seen examples of people living out loud on social media, posting details of their lives including schedules, personal information, where they are, who they are with, what they are doing, and what they are eating. It seems that little thought is given to privacy as a new generation learns to live nearly every aspect of their lives out in the open. One expert respondent who wanted to remain anonymous said, “Privacy will be the new taboo and will not be appreciated or understood by upcoming generations.” That is already partially true. [When privacy issues are addressed, more and more people — particularly younger people — respond by asking, “So, what?”](#) As we move forward, we are in danger of become a self-surveilling society.

Chief researcher in networking and infrastructure for British Telecom, Bob Briscoe, said the willingness of Internet users to share information that they suspect is being harvested, bought, and sold is based on valuing convenience over privacy. “Lack of concern about privacy stems from complacency because most people’s life experiences teach them that revealing their private information allows commercial (and public) organisations to make their lives easier (by targeting their needs), whereas the detrimental cases tend to be very serious but relatively rare.” Briscoe’s appraisal that detrimental cases are relatively rare depends on one’s definition of detriment. Not all things that are detrimental are immediately apparent. For instance, as facial recognition software becomes more prevalent, everyone will be “scannable,” creating a world where anonymity will be nearly impossible. That would allow any tyrannical government to track down anyone it deems a threat to its tyranny.

Moving forward, many young Internet users who today are more than willing to trade their birthright of privacy and liberty for a mess of potage (or a cup of coffee) are going to become the example that the next generation imitates. What one generation accepts, the next expects.

Like many of the other respondents, Paul Saffo, managing director at Discern Analytics and consulting



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associate professor at Stanford University, points to the love of convenience as the major cause of a loss of privacy: “While Americans claim to care about privacy, they care even more about convenience. Americans have happily sacrificed their privacy over the last several decades, and will continue to do so, even as they complain.” He also believes that people have lost the concept of privacy as a right: “Privacy has already shifted from being a right to a good that is purchased. Privacy-as-good will continue to advance and become the 2025 norm.”

Benjamin Franklin famously said, “Those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety.” What would he say about those who are willing to give up privacy — an essential part of liberty — for something as small as convenience?

Homero Gil de Zuniga, who leads the Digital Media Research Program at the University of Texas-Austin, predicted that by 2025 “Information will be even more pervasive, even more liquid, and portable. The digital private sphere, as well as the digital public sphere, will most likely completely overlap.” If he is correct, those of us who cling to our notions of privacy rights may appear extreme and find ourselves out of sync with the world around us.

Perhaps the reason why the digital public and private spheres are already showing so much overlap is because far too few of us understand the basic philosophy of liberty. Hal Varian, who has a vested interest in creating a self-surveilling society as chief economist for Google, is aware that some of us will not go quietly into that dark Utopian night. His response was very telling. “Of course, there will be people who choose not to use such services, but they will be a small minority. Everyone will expect to be tracked and monitored, since the advantages, in terms of convenience, safety, and services, will be so great. There will, of course, be restrictions on how such information can be used, but continuous monitoring will be the norm.”

Google had revenues of \$58.8 billion in 2013 (which was nearly double its revenue in 2011). While this huge corporate enterprise makes much of its money on Android licenses, Nexus devices, and other products, its main product is the information it harvests from its users. If you are not paying to use a service, you are likely the product that is being sold. The anti-virus software company, AVG, has created an application called PrivacyFix that helps you adjust your privacy settings for many online services. It also estimates what you are worth in annual revenues to companies such as Google. (Because of [the way I have my privacy settings](#), I am worth nothing to the search giant. Zero. Nada. Sorry, Google. I guess I am part of Hal Varian’s “small minority.”)

Unfortunately those of us in this “small minority” — those who love liberty more than convenience — are living in a world that is rapidly tilting more and more in the opposite direction. That dark Utopian night is descending upon us, whether we like it or not. As things continue to move in the direction of ubiquitous monitoring, we will find it increasingly difficult to maintain any sense of privacy without seeming like either hermits or criminals. John Markoff, *New York Times* senior science writer, perhaps summed it up best: “I have been writing about privacy, security, and computer networks since the late 1970s. The trend is decidedly away from individual privacy, as well as away from online security. We are on our way to the ‘Panopticon.’ Conceivably, a ‘Privacy Chernobyl’ might alter this, but I do not believe the Snowden materials will. I believe that a decade is an infinite period in terms of Internet time. Too many things are possible, and anything we say today would be largely speculative. I am struck by the fact that there is such a gulf between the European and US privacy norms. I believe this is because of World War II. When the Nazis entered Paris, the first thing they did was head for the phone directory.”



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What can be done to turn the tide? We must be proactive in the fight for digital liberty. Now, more than ever, privacy and liberty are inseparable. If we are diligent and determined, we can re-introduce the concept of liberty that once guided the thinking of Americans. University of Washington associate professor of communication Gina Neff believes the time to do that is now. “People will be increasingly more accepting of exchanging privacy for services and customization, unless advocacy and education efforts are increased now.”



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