First State Super: Thought Leadership Series

in collaboration with the NSW Privacy Commissioner

Privacy Matters

A lecture delivered by Hugh Mackay

Tuesday 10 November 2015, Museum of Sydney, 6.00 pm

Go to the Internet at any hour of the day or night, or open your newspaper tomorrow morning, and you'll find stories about privacy - the invasion of it, the protection of it, or various dystopian threats to it. I have recently been struck by three news items in particular:

> *The Australian* has reported that a patent granted to Facebook in the US will allow lenders to use the credit history of an applicant's circle of Facebook friends when deciding whether or not to grant a loan.
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> The widely-reported Ashley Madison infidelity website hacking scandal exposed the identity of millions of users of the site. What was also exposed was the irony of people who were reckless about protecting their own privacy falling victim to hackers who treat *everyone's* privacy with contempt.
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> The so-called PlaneBreakUp social media phenomenon arose from a female passenger recording, complete with photos taken with her mobile phone, a raging argument between a man and a woman on a plane before take-off from New York. The argument, though apparently ferocious enough to have seemed terminal, was resolved - again, fully documented - in a boozy and very physical make-up after take-off. It went viral, of course.

It would be both a truism and an understatement to say that our attitudes to privacy are changing. But let's take a step back from the clatter of daily news reportage and look at the bigger picture. What is this thing called privacy? How do social and cultural changes affect our attitudes to privacy? And what do we gain or lose - as individuals and as a society - when we tighten or loosen our grip on personal information about ourselves?

The single biggest factor influencing our attitudes to privacy is the communication culture of a society and that culture, in turn, is determined by the media we use to communicate with each other.

To demonstrate, we don't need to go back as far as Paleolithic culture - though we're so heavily into Paleo diets and Paleo sleep patterns, an examination of Paleo privacy can't be far off. But let's go back at least far enough to think about the concept of privacy in the context of any pre-mass-media culture - a primitive tribal culture, or a Medieval village culture, where, for all but an academic or theocratic elite, literacy is unknown. People talk and listen to each other - and sometimes draw pictures as well.

Communication in such a culture is essentially oral. And because messages are only spoken, not written or mediated in any other way, messages tend to be more emotional, subjective and personal in character. The message can't be separated from the person: in such cultures, 'meaning' is recognised as being in the person not the words used.

An oral communication culture is characterised by open sharing of information: what one knows, all know. The sharing of information is a symbol of the connectedness of the tribal or village. It's a herd-based, highly inclusive, highly conformist culture, and the main method of social control is the use of shame (which is an essentially social, public phenomenon, unlike guilt which is essentially personal and private).

The downside of all this sharing and inclusiveness in an oral culture is the intense mistrust and even enmity felt towards those outside the culture: in-groups breed out-groups. Language, as we know, is the great facilitator of communication within a culture, but its purpose is also to exclude those from another culture: the French don't only speak French to communicate with other French people, but also to ensure that the Germans won't know what they're talking about. And it's the same with children's playground argot designed to create an exclusive little herd whose language is impenetrable to others … or to parents. So language is simultaneously a repository of culture, a means of social inclusion, and a barrier between us and those we wish to exclude.

In this pre-media culture I'm describing, the written word exists - as it has existed for thousands of years. But *mass* literacy does not exist and, indeed, even a thinker as influential as Socrates was bitterly opposed to the widespread use of writing: he thought it would kill proper interactive discourse (the "Socratic method") and he slammed writing in much the same way as some contemporary commentators slam Twitter.

Enter the printing press and the invention of movable type. When Caxton in England and Gutenberg in Germany unveiled their inventions, few foresaw what a revolution would be wrought by the creation of a machine that would facilitate mass dissemination of the printed word. It wasn't an overnight revolution; indeed, it took 400 years to reach its full flowering in mass literacy. But the advent of the printing press was the dawn of a radically new communication culture - the print culture - with profound implications for our attitudes to privacy, among its many radical effects.

In a communication culture that came to be dominated by the printed word - a culture in which the printed word came to be seen as the highest form of language - readers and writers gradually learned to submit themselves to the rigorously rational and linear form of print - one word after the other, left to right across the page, then line by line down the page. Nothing could be more different from the subtlety, complexity, spontaneity and subjectivity of the oral culture! We learned to say things like "Let me see it in black and white", as if the written word had some inherent authority lacking in mere speech. We warned each other again "reading between the lines", even though, in non-print-based communication, most of the richness and subtlety lies beyond the words themselves.

In the print culture, communication is a more private and individual process. Speaking and listening are social activities; reading and writing are solitary activities. And, in this new culture, the message and its author are separated: we have only the words on the page to go by, with no recourse to (and perhaps no knowledge of) the person who wrote them. So we come to think of 'meaning' as being *in* the words, rather than in the mind of the person who used the words to express their ideas.

There were enormous social and cultural consequences of this revolutionary shift in our mode of mass communication. It encouraged the rise of individualism. It separated the intellectual life of 'the word' from the social life of the community. And, from the perspective of this evening's discussion, we can see how it created an entirely new concern with personal privacy as one of our core freedoms: the freedom to choose what I reveal and what I conceal about myself.

The rise of individualism and the concomitant concern with personal privacy also saw a shift in emphasis from public shame to private guilt (often reinforced by religion) as a means of social control.

During the first half of the 20th century, print tightened its grip on our culture. Compulsory education brought us closer to mass literacy than we had ever been. But then, in the second half of that century, we saw the beginning of a loosening of that grip. The invention on non-print mass media - film, radio and then, most dramatically, television - threw out a challenge to the primacy of the printed word and began a process that has seen us, in many ways, move back towards our more primitive, oral-culture origins. Once again, courtesy of TV in particular, the words were back in the mouths of people saying them: the subtlety, the nuances of speech, facial expression and body language were restored to mass communication.

In the early days of both radio and television (and, of course, film) media consumption was a social experience: people generally sat around their radio or TV set (or in the cinema) with other people, responding as a family or social group (and the TV executives who invented canned laughter were trying to simulate that experience of responding in a group). In the late 1950s and even into the 1960-s, people would invite

friends and neighbours to join them to watch particular TV programs. TV became a kind of "electronic campfire" around which millions of people gathered to watch the same material at the same time - and then discuss it at work or school the next day.

We didn't recognise what was happening at the time, but all this was the beginning of a process that would lead to the advent -and the transforming impact - of social media in the 21st century. It was the beginning of nothing less than another cultural revolution.

Although the new world of digital social media still relied heavily on the written word (or, at least, the key-padded word), the words themselves are changing as new devices tend to merge the written and spoken word, and social media language become more cryptic, more phonetic and more oral in character.

Again, there's an emphasis not just on the transmission of messages but on the sharing of information - just like the old tribal and villages cultures, except now the tribes are potentially global, consist mainly of strangers, and make the idea of the out-group almost unthinkable. We're *all* in it!

So what's happening to privacy in the midst of these revolutionary culture-shifts?

As in pre-media cultures, privacy is coming to seem less important in the electronically, digitally connected world. The emphasis, once again, is on sharing, belonging, being part of the group network. FOMO (fear of missing out) becomes a major driver for our addiction to our IT devices, and even our sense of personal identity is challenged by the phenomenon of multiple online identities and by the impossibility of knowing whether online 'friends' are who they say they are. 'Who am I?' become a less interesting (and perhaps even a less important) question.

In such a culture - leaving all political considerations aside - figures like Julian Assange and Edward Snowdon become folk heroes to many people for opening up previously private "officially secret" information. Their specific motivations are submerged beneath a general impression that their actions are merely part of an unstoppable trend towards everything being 'out there'.

As part of this culture-shift, we see, once again, the rise of public shaming as a form of social control and the gradual decline of private guilt. Social media have become not only a vehicle for personal aggrandisement but also for *global* shaming (which is why online bullying is so emotionally damaging to young people: their humiliation is on an unprecedentedly vast scale, and the identity of their bully might not even be known to them).

So have we enacted the 2014 Australian Privacy Principles in the nick of time for a rising generation of 'digital natives' who couldn't care less about privacy, or about the security of personal data - whether financial transactions, health records, or personal messages to Facebook friends?

It would be simplistic to say 'yes'; the picture is more complicated than that.

Research from the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (OAIC) in 2013 shows that 78 percent of people *do not like their online activities being monitored,* yet, overwhelmingly, they continue to engage with the very websites and social media platforms where they believe such monitoring is talking place.

In general, we don't like knowing that our smartphone reveals our whereabouts to the phone company - and who knows who else? We don't like knowing that our Opal card reveals when and where we hopped on or off a bus or train. We find scary the idea that a Samsung smart TV could transmit our domestic conversations to Samsung. And we certainly don't like the idea that the details of all our phone calls and text messages are now recorded by our government (and in the US, at least, that even the content of those conversations may be recorded as well). We don't like knowing that our personal web-browsing history is permanently stored and accessible … to who knows whom?

We don't like any of that, but we live with it, perhaps seeing it as the price we have to pay for all that near-miraculous and highly seductive technology. We are certainly adapting to the new world of surveillance: another finding from that 2013 OAIC survey was that 60 percent of people now believe social media usage is a public activity.

So do we no longer *care* as much about privacy as we say we do? And are we only saying we do as an echo of a bygone communication culture? Are we resigning ourselves to a massive loss of privacy and deciding that, on balance, we're okay with that?

That would be a serious over-simplification. Even though it's hard to see where this will end up, because we are still in the thick of a swiftly-changing communication culture, there are signs of resistance to a free-for-all incursion into our personal privacy. In various parts of the world, for instance, new laws have been enacted that respond to privacy concerns on behalf of young users of the Internet, giving those users the right to erasure - 'the right to be forgotten'. The laws are aimed at protecting young people who may be haunted by youthful indiscretions at a time of life when many of us self-reveal before we self-reflect.

Another privacy concern among the young popped up unexpectedly in a 2014 survey of teenagers in eight EU countries. The Global Social Media Impact Study reported that European teenagers were typically unconcerned about how information about them is used commercially or as part of surveillance practices by security agencies, yet they had a major concern about Facebook privacy - namely, that their parents were on it - that had caused them to abandon Facebook in droves. (There comes that fateful day when your own mother asks to be your Facebook friend - time to find a new hideout in cyberspace - *quick!*)

We know what we gain from the wonderful new world of IT - there are six big plusses:

access to undreamed-of quantities of data (which has taken all the fun out of arguments, by the way - the answers can always be found);

convenience of mobile devices that make Dick Tracey's two-way wrist radio seem archaic;

speed of data-exchange that has become almost instantaneous;

connection to people, all over the world, who are inaccessible face-to-face (with huge benefits to extended and far-flung families and friendship circles);

the creation of online 'communities' that are utterly unlike local neighbourhood communities but nevertheless promote a feeling of connectedness and combat loneliness;

perpetual stimulation - the Internet never sleeps.

But what do we lose?

What are the dangers - for individuals and society - of loosening our grip on personal information, surrendering to the implications of the new technology (for surveillance, for instance), and adapting to a world where we are steadily removing *human presence* from more and more of our transactions of every kind?

There are seven obvious risks:

the erosion of trust between citizens and their government, because citizens are increasingly being asked to place their trust in machines, systems and algorithms, rather than people;

the erosion of trust between consumers and corporations, for precisely the same reasons;

the erosion of trust between each other: research by Edith Cowan University has shown that only 35 percent of Australians say they trust their neighbours (partly because we are less concerned about nurturing the local neighbourhood community when we feel 'connected' online, though 'nosy neighbours' have nothing on digital surveillance!);

the erosion of our sense of control over our lives (and our personal privacy) - a sense of powerlessness in the face of the secret world of big data and data-sharing with unknown parties;

erosion of the sense of personal identity;

the sense of a loss of one very particular and significant freedom - the freedom to choose what we will reveal and what we will conceal about ourselves;

for society-at-large, that all adds up to a heightened sense of insecurity, and a greater vulnerability to fear (the kind of fear that erodes our faith in democracy itself: 'who can you trust?').

I recently stood on Wynyard Station, watching the row of CCTV cameras rotating on their stands on the other side of the tracks, continuously filming us all as we waited for our train, and I recalled the words of Hitler's master propagandist, Joseph Goebbels: *If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear.*

Is that the best we can do for a moral principle to guide us through the complexities of the emerging world of privacy invasion, with all its (possibly unintended) consequences for the wellbeing of our society? I hope not.

Finally, let me suggest three 'take-home' messages:

1. The revolution is unstoppable, because we humans tend to do whatever we are capable of doing, so we shall have to consider not how to stop it, but how to deal with it and how to mitigate or minimise its worst effects.
2. When, as legislators, policy-makers or information technology professionals, we know that what we are doing is challenging the very character of our society and the wellbeing of its citizens, we should think very carefully before we take the next step - whatever that may be.
3. We should all regard *everything* we send into cyberspace as being in the public domain. (Who knows where that email trail might end up?)

The greatest irony in all this is that as we switch *away* from face-to-face encounters in more and more of our commercial and personal transactions, we are coming to realise that the only really safe way to say something private and confidential is to meet face-to-face, in an isolated place, leaving all your electronic devices somewhere else, and to speak very quietly … and that's assuming the other person isn't wired.

Hugh Mackay is a social researcher and the author, most recently, of *The Art of Belonging,* published by Macmillan.