

TOPIC GUIDE: ONLINE PRIVACY (REVISED 2017)

"IN THE DIGITAL AGE WE SHOULD NOT EXPECT OUR ONLINE ACTIVITIES TO REMAIN PRIVATE"**PUBLISHED: 23 AUG 2017****AUTHOR: ANWAR ODURO-KWARTENG**

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**INTRODUCTION**

25 years on from the introduction of the World Wide Web, the internet now permeates our everyday lives; many of us use it daily to shop, pay our bills, and communicate with friends. The digital revolution [Ref: [Techopedia](#)], has made unfathomable amounts of information available at the click of a mouse, opening us up to the world like never before. But have the benefits of the digital age come at a cost to our privacy? From the recent revenge porn controversy involving Rob Kardashian and Blac Chyna, resulting in personal photographs being leaked to the media and online [Ref: [BBC](#)], and Facebook attempting to manipulate users' moods [Ref: [London Review of Books](#)], to Google admitting that users of its Gmail system can have no "reasonable expectation" that their communications are confidential [Ref: [Guardian](#)], privacy online has become a key issue of our time. Some argue that: "The rules of online privacy will continue to change" [Ref: [Slate](#)], but suggest that technological innovation means that we actually have a more dynamic, interconnected world as a result. Whilst for others, the threat to privacy in the digital world is far more dangerous, because "the internet doesn't just see what we want it to see. Its gaze is not limited to the airbrushed facades of our digital profiles. It peers around the corner, and sees the tangled mess behind the scenes" [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. In addition, the State's role in surveilling our online activities for security reasons also concerns many observers, with the 'snoopers' charter', passed in 2016, expanding the electronic surveillance powers of the UK Intelligence Community and police (Ref: [BBC](#)). This contentious law has divided opinion; despite government justifications, whistle-blower Edward Snowden condemning the legislation as "the most extreme surveillance in the history of western democracy", claiming it "goes further than many autocracies" (Ref: [Guardian](#)). With many of us now increasingly living our lives online, has the digital age changed how we perceive the private sphere, or is privacy an absolute that we should expect online as well as off?

For further reading use the menu bar on the right hand side.

DEBATE IN CONTEXT

This section provides a summary of the key issues in the debate, set in the context of recent discussions and the competing positions that have been adopted.

How much do we care about online privacy?

For civil liberties campaigner Shami Chakrabarti, privacy is “an important part of the human experience” both online and off, and should be protected as far as possible [Ref: **British Library** [↗](#)]. However despite such sentiments, John Naughton, a professor of the public understanding of technology, observes that the debate about online privacy is a fundamentally confused one – with users complaining about breaches of privacy by government, social media sites and corporations, whilst simultaneously surrendering all kinds of personal information on the web. He concludes by arguing that “when push comes to shove, their privacy isn’t as important to them as they say it is” [Ref: **Guardian** [↗](#)]. More fundamentally, for writer Alex Preston, the digital age has meant that: “We have come to the end of privacy...the internet is radically altering our sense of what (if anything) should remain private” [Ref: **Guardian** [↗](#)]. The advent of the digital age was meant to embody the free sharing and dissemination of information between people across borders, and this human need to remain connected with each other is the very basis of the internet. Media commentator Greg Satell observes that our ambivalence towards privacy is not new because: “Whilst we do value privacy, we value other things more” [Ref: **Forbes** [↗](#)]. After all, as one critic of internet privacy argues, we are not compelled to use social media: “If you want your online social activity to be as private as possible, simply stop using free, ad-supported social networks altogether” [Ref: **Independent** [↗](#)].

State security in the digital age

“Privacy has never been an absolute right” declared Richard Hannigan, the previous head of the British intelligence and security organisation GCHQ, when defending state surveillance [Ref: **Financial Times** [↗](#)]. In July 2014, the debate surrounding privacy and security initially came to public attention when the UK Government controversially passed the new Data Protection and Investigatory Powers Act (DRIP), which strengthened their ability to access digital information by compelling communications companies to store all user data for 12 months for use by the security services [Ref: **Gov.uk** [↗](#)]. The debate continues as The Trump administration is aims to reverse Obama-era regulations designed to protect internet users' private data – allowing information to be shared without consent from users (Ref: **BBC** [↗](#)). Advocates of State surveillance argue that radical terrorist groups such as Islamic State now regularly use social media to communicate, and even obtain instructions on how to build incendiary devices online, meaning that robust legislation is vital [Ref: **BBC News** [↗](#)]. Following the London Bridge terrorist attack, Prime Minister Theresa May has suggested that new agreements must be introduced to regulate the internet, in order to deprive extremists of ‘safe spaces online’ (Ref: **Independent** [↗](#)) As Home Secretary, she also suggested that powers which allow police and security services to track our online activities, are vital in solving complex criminal enterprises, and could even be used to help catch paedophiles who may use the internet to distribute indecent images [Ref: **Guardian** [↗](#)]. In opposition to these arguments, many are gravely concerned about the encroachment on our privacy that state surveillance represents, with the former United Nations’ High Commissioner Navi Pillay describing internet privacy as being an issue as important as human rights [Ref: **Guardian** [↗](#)]. For supporters of online privacy more broadly, the issue is a moral one; privacy is an inviolable right, even in a digital age, and the state and corporations having the ability to invade that right is a very serious issue because: “To maintain any validity, our democratic rights must apply in virtual as well as real space” [Ref: **Change.Org** [↗](#)].

Do we need an online Magna Carta?

In response to the revelations of widespread online surveillance by former United States National Security Agency (NSA) operative Edward Snowden, the UN Human Rights Council stated that: “There is

a universal recognition of the fundamental importance, and enduring relevance, of the right to privacy, and to ensure that it is safeguarded in law and in practice” [Ref: [Human Rights Council](#)]. Subsequently, over 800 years after Magna Carta [Ref: [British Library](#)], creator of the World Wide Web, Sir Tim Berners-Lee has branded the ‘snooper’s charter as a ‘security nightmare’ (Ref: [BBC](#)) and continues to call for a Digital Bill of Rights, in order to ensure privacy and freedom of expression to all internet users worldwide [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)]. Supporters of online privacy are unhappy with the effect that surveillance and data collection is having on the web, with one commentator suggesting that the internet has lost its way - abandoning the principles of freedom and egalitarianism which it was meant to embody: “At its inception the world wide web seemed to promise an escape from corporate and governmental powers, an egalitarian free-for-all. Now? It has increasingly become a sophisticated extension of them. The hopes once nurtured by the man who invented the web have been not so much abandoned as betrayed” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. However, questions remain about the degree to which privacy should be protected online. In 2014, the ‘Right to be forgotten’ ruling by the European Court of Justice, set an initial precedent which means that individuals, companies and even Governments, can apply to internet search engines such as Google requesting that information about them be removed from search results [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. For critics this is worrying because the principle of the ruling indicates that “the balance between privacy and freedom of expression is tilting in the wrong direction” [Ref: [Times](#)], as a Times editorial opines. In addition, writer John Hendel argues that individuals and governments now essentially have the right to airbrush their past, meaning that: “The question of censorship is inevitable” [Ref: [Atlantic](#)] This links to the recent debate that engulfed the presidential race was the conflict of Hilary Clinton and her private email address, as she became the sole arbiter in the wider debate of what should and shouldn't be provided to the government. [Ref: [BBC](#)] Has the digital age so fundamentally changed our understanding of the private sphere that: “The edifices of privacy that we once thought we understood are melting like ice in a heat wave” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]? Is the right to privacy an absolute, or should we be more realistic online – after all, the internet was created for the sharing and dissemination of information, which we all do willingly? And ultimately, should we expect our online activities to remain private?

ESSENTIAL READING

It is crucial for debaters to have read the articles in this section, which provide essential information and arguments for and against the debate motion. Students will be expected to have additional evidence and examples derived from independent research, but they can expect to be criticised if they lack a basic familiarity with the issues raised in the essential reading.

Investigatory Powers Act 2016 - overview [🔗](#)

Home Office 1 March 2016

Data Retention and Investigatory Powers Act (DRIP) 2014 [🔗](#)

Home Office 25 July 2014

The right to privacy in a digital age [🔗](#)

Human Rights Council 30 June 2014

FOR

No one cares that Google is snooping in their inbox [🔗](#)

Jennifer O'Connell [Irish Times](#) 27 June 2017

The ‘Snooper’s Charter’ hysteria is absurd – The IPB sets a new standard for the world [🔗](#)

Jonathan Evans [Daily Telegraph](#) 9 December 2016

Safety is more important than privacy [🔗](#)

Ron Iphofen [Times Higher Education](#) 28 April 2016

The web is a terrorist’s command and control network of choice [🔗](#)

Richard Hannigan **Financial Times** 3 November 2014

I'm not worried about online privacy [↗](#)

Alex Proud **Telegraph** 16 June 2014

AGAINST

Theresa May's surveillance plans should worry us all [↗](#)

John Naughton **Guardian** 12 June 2016

Only China and Russia violate their citizens' privacy as much the Snoopers' Charter allows [↗](#)

Mike Harris **Independent** 2 March 2016

The Tory war on privacy [↗](#)

Tom Slater **Spiked** 13 November 2015

The death of privacy [↗](#)

Alex Preston **Guardian** 3 August 2014

The primacy of internet privacy [↗](#)

The Age 9 March 2014

IN DEPTH

The solace of oblivion [↗](#)

Jeffrey Toobin **New Yorker** 29 September 2014

The Internet's original sin [↗](#)

Ethan Zuckerman **Atlantic** 14 August 2014

KEY TERMS

Definitions of key concepts that are crucial for understanding the topic. Students should be familiar with these terms and the different ways in which they are used and interpreted and should be prepared to explain their significance.

Censorship [↗](#)

Digital Revolution [↗](#)

Privacy [↗](#)

Right To Be Forgotten [↗](#)

BACKGROUNDEERS

Useful websites and materials that provide a good starting point for research.

Theresa May's crackdown on the internet will let terror in the backdoor [↗](#)

Alex Lee **Guardian** 20 June 2017

What will the UK election mean for online privacy? [↗](#)

Vladlena Benson **Independent** 6 June 2017

Blaming the internet for terrorism misses the point [↗](#)

Emily Dreyfuss **Wired** 6 June 2017

Why we're so hypocritical about online privacy [↗](#)

Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic and Nathalie Nahai **Harvard Business Review** 1 May 2017

Do you know how much private information you give away every day? [↗](#)

Manoush Zomorodi **Time** 29 March 2017

The Guardian view on internet privacy: technology can't fix it [↗](#)

Guardian 13 January 2017

The good, the bad, and the meaningless: Jeremy Corbyn's 'digital democracy' decoded [↗](#)

Amelia Tait **New Statesman** 30 August 2016

The tyranny of transparency [↗](#)

Tim Black **Spiked** 26 June 2016

The right to privacy for children online [↗](#)

Teddy Wayne **New York Times** 15 April 2016

Don't complain about privacy, its your fault [↗](#)

Oliver Moody **The Times** 8 July 2014

We need a Magna Carta for the internet [↗](#)

Sir Tim Berners-Lee **Huffington Post** 5 June 2014

Take my online data, please [↗](#)

Cyrus Nemati **Slate** 6 February 2014

ORGANISATIONS

Links to organisations, campaign groups and official bodies who are referenced within the Topic Guide or which will be of use in providing additional research information.

British Library: My Digital Rights Project [↗](#)

Change.org [↗](#)

Privacy International [↗](#)

Web We Want [↗](#)

IN THE NEWS

Relevant recent news stories from a variety of sources, which ensure students have an up to date awareness of the state of the debate.

Trump campaign is sued over leaked emails linked to Russians [↗](#)

Charlie Savage **New York Times** 12 July 2017

Liberty wins right to challenge parts of Snoopers' Charter [↗](#)

Phil Muncaster **Info-Security Magazine** July 2017

Snapchat's new map feature raises fears of stalking and bullying [↗](#)

Olivia Solon **Guardian** 23 June 2017

Snapchat's newest feature is also its biggest privacy threat [↗](#)

Dani Deahl **The Verge** 23 June 2017

Snoops may soon be able to buy your browsing history. Thank the US Congress [↗](#)

Bruce Schneier, **Guardian** 18 April 2017

EU launches public consultation into fears about future of internet [↗](#)

Guardian 18 April 2017

WhatsApp accused of giving terrorists 'a secret place to hide' [↗](#)

Gordon Rayner **Telegraph** 27 March 2017

Dating apps have turned us into a generation of private detectives [↗](#)

Rachel Hosie **Independent** 5 January 2017

AUDIO/VISUAL

The Privacy Paradox [↗](#)

Note to Self (podcast) **WYNC** 30 January 2017

Is nothing private anymore? [↗](#)

Battle of Ideas 19 October 2013

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