

# Is privacy overrated?

**They're watching your every move. Big deal.**

BY David Plotz FROM GQ

Let's start by invading my privacy. I own a three bedroom house at 2922 Cortland Place in Washington, D.C. I have a mortgage from National city Mortgage Co. I am married to Hanna Rosin. We have a two-year old child. I drive a 2001 Volkswagen, D.C. license plate BE 6981.

I have no criminal record. I have never been party to a lawsuit. I have no tax liens against me. I have never declared bankruptcy (unlike 2 of the 11 other David Plotzes in the United States). I have no ties to organized crime, though I do hold stock options in Microsoft.

The James Mintz Group, a leading corporate investigation firm head quartered in New York City, learned all this about me in a few hours with computer, an Internet connection and a single phone call-and without even, bending the law.

If you spent a bit more time, you would discover that my Social Security number is 577-86-4300, that I paid \$812,000 for the house in October, 2002, and that I bank at Bank of America. You could have my listed home telephone number in two mouse clicks and my unlisted-cell phone number if you paid the right data broker.

Corporations, meanwhile, are recording my every move. I don't watch what I eat, but Safeway does; thanks to my club card. Telecoms can pinpoint where I am when I make my cell phone calls. Clothing stores analyze my purchases in detail, recording everything from the expansion of my waist (up to 35 from 32) to my recent infatuation with three-button-suits.

The credit reporting agencies know every time I have made a late payment to my Citibank MasterCard (number 6577... I'm not that stupid) and every time I have applied for credit. This is all going on my permanent record.\_

Surveillance cameras are watching me in malls and sometimes on public streets. Even my own computer is spying on me. A scan of my hard drive turns up 141 cookies, deposited by companies that track me around the Web. I recently surfed a porn site (just because a high school friend runs it, I swear). The cookies may know about it. My employer probably does too. After all, my employment contract permits the boss to track all my on-the-job Web surfing, and read all my work e-mail too.

If my company isn't watching, perhaps the FBI is: Its Carnivore program rafts through vast rivers of e-mail flow in search of criminal activity.

They-a *they* that includes the feds, a thousand corporations, a million telemarketers, my employer, my enemies and maybe even my friends know all this about me, and more. And unless you are a technophobe hermit who pays for everything in cash, they know all this about you too.

To which I say, "Hallelujah!"

I'm in the minority. Privacy paranoia has become a national obsession. Since last November, pundits, politicians and privacy activists have been shouting about the latest government intrusion

on privacy. The Defense Department's office of Total Information Awareness plans to collect massive quantities of information about all Americans-everything from what you buy to where you travel in gigantic databases, and then sift through the information for clues about terrorism. Total Information Awareness has been denounced as Orwellian, and there are efforts to stop the program.

You could fill a library with privacy alarmism books ([The End of Privacy](#); [Privacy: How to Protect What's Left of It](#)). Congress and the state legislatures are awash in proposals to protect privacy. Horror stories fuel the fire of anxiety. The sailor the Navy tried to boot out after he used the word "gay" in a supposedly confidential AOL profile. The stalker who bought his target's address from a Web information broker, tracked her down and murdered her. The sale of Social Security numbers by LexisNexis.

You can more or less distill the essence of the privacy-rights movement to this idea: Big Brother and Big Business observe us too often, without our consent. The most intimate details of our lives are being sold and used secretly to make judgments about us, and we have no control over it.

It sounds appalling. But, in fact, the privacy crusade is built on a foundation of hypocrisy, paranoia, economic know-nothingism and bogus nostalgia.

The first flaw of privacy: People care a great deal about their own, but not at all about anyone else's. We figure, why should anyone get to review my real-estate records or read my divorce proceedings?

My life is my own business.

But I bet you want to know if your baby-sitter has ever been convicted of child abuse, if your business partner has a history of bankruptcy, if your boyfriend is still married. When your husband flees the state to duck child support payments, wouldn't you use his Social Security number, driving records, real estate filings and whatever else you could get your hands on to track him down?

You don't want the Total Information Awareness office to know what you bought at the hardware store or where you take vacations. But if your neighbor is stockpiling fertilizer and likes to holiday in Iraq, don't you want the government to notice? If government had been using even basic data-mining techniques before September 11, at least 11 of the hijackers might have been stopped, according to a report by the Markle Foundation. Wouldn't that be worth letting the feds know you bought an Xbox last month?

Hysteria is growing that companies are shadowing us constantly. They are. But here, too, privacy is a silly value, both because "protecting" it is enormously costly and because it's not really being violated.

Ignorant companies are bankrupt companies. A recent study found that restricting marketing data would raise catalog clothing prices up to 11 percent, costing shoppers \$1 billion per year. By buying address lists and consumer profiles, Victoria's Secret knows to send a catalog to my house, and International Male knows not to bother. Their marketing costs plummet. We get less junk mail, lower prices and catalogs for clothing we might buy.

Your father probably shopped with a clothier who knew he wore a 44 long suit and preferred a faint pinstripe. Such friendships are extinct, murdered by megastores and armchair shopping. But today, when I log on to Amazon.com, I am pitched another book about privacy, because Amazon has learned that I am the kind of guy who buys books on privacy. They are saving me time (which is money) by delivering what I like.

INFORMATION SHARING is also an engine of entrepreneurship. Thanks to cheap mailing lists, upstarts can challenge titanic businesses, lowering prices and bringing clever products to market.

Losing privacy has made it much cheaper to use a credit card or buy a house. Credit card and mortgage companies collect and share information about who pays, who doesn't, etc. Because- they have an idea who will default, they offer significantly lower rates to people with good records and make credit much more available to poorer customers.

It's true that identity theft has become easier. On the other hand, credit card fraud, a much more common crime, is harder. Companies often catch a thief before a customer even notices her card is missing. (Their observant computers notice that her buying habits have suddenly changed.)

Similarly, surveillance cameras reduce shoplifting and stop ATM robberies, while cameras in police cars reduce incidents of police brutality. Lack of privacy actually tends to fight crime, not cause it.

There is one notable exception to the argument for transparency, however. If medical records are unsealed, especially to employers, people may avoid treatment, fearing they will be stigmatized or fired for their health problems.

PHILOSOPHICALLY, many people don't like the idea that a soulless corporation records that they buy sexy underwear, subscribe to Penthouse and collect heavy metal CDs. Friends were freaked out to receive ads for infant formula soon after they gave birth. How did the company know? Is the hospital selling your baby already?

But this worry is an example of the egocentric fallacy: the belief that because people know something about you, they care.

One wonderful, terrible thing about modern capitalism is that companies don't care. You are not a person. You are a wallet. Privacy advocates like to say, "it didn't used to be this way." They hark back to a time-it generally sounds like 19th-century rural America-when stores didn't record your every purchase and doctors didn't report your ailments to a monolithic insurance company. You could abandon a bad life in one state, reinvent yourself 50 miles away, and no one needed to know. Nothing went down on your permanent record, because there was no permanent record.

This nostalgia imagines a past that never existed. Small-town America never guarded anyone's privacy. In small towns, as anyone who lives in one can attest, people can be nosy and punish nonconformity viciously.

The right to privacy is not mentioned in the Constitution, and was not even conceived until 1890. Censuses in the 18th and 19th centuries demanded answers to intrusive questions, such as one compelling Americans to reveal any history of insanity in the family.

Nostalgists also fail to recognize that technology is creating a golden age for what they actually care about: real privacy. This is nothing that Amazon.com cares about. Nothing that Total Information Awareness can track down. Nothing that needs to be protected by encryption.

The opposite of privacy is not invasion of privacy: It is openness. Real privacy is what allows us to share hopes, dreams, fantasies, fears, and makes us feel we can safely expose our faults and quirks and still be loved. Privacy is the space between us and our dearest-where everything is known and does not matter.

There has never been a better time for real privacy. The Internet allows people who have peculiar interests, social awkwardness or debilitating health problems to create communities that never could have existed before. Online, they can find other folk, who want to re-enact the Battle of Bull Run or sunbathe nude or whatever your bag is, baby.

By surrendering some privacy, that is, by revealing our humanity with all its peculiarity in chat rooms or on e-mail or in newsgroups, we gain much greater privacy: an intimacy with others, a sense of belonging; to be less private sometimes is to have more privacy. To be less private is to be more ourselves.