
In Ten Years, We Will Have Zero Privacy

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A labor lawyer told me this story. A shopper who had slipped and fallen in a puddle of water in the frozen food section of a large grocery store became the plaintiff in a lawsuit. Both parties agreed that the water puddle was traceable to faulty condensation. The shopper, a middle-aged man, had badly injured his tailbone in the fall and was suing for damages.

During the trial store management tried to blame the shopper, suggesting he was either under the influence of alcohol, badly hung-over, or, in fact, a degenerate and untrustworthy alcoholic who had slipped in the puddle “on purpose,” looking to make a quick buck. They supported their claim by introducing a record of previous purchases, showing he had bought a significant amount of liquor. The plaintiff and his lawyer had no idea they kept a record.

This occurred in the mid-1990s, almost twenty years ago, back when computer snooping was nowhere near as sophisticated as it is today. When we consider the “progress” that has been made in the ability to delve into the private lives of consumers, it’s terrifying. They know where we shop, where we vacation, what we buy, what we read, what we watch on television, and what we visit on the Internet.

How this applies to “labor” is especially disturbing. Before hiring a job applicant, a company now has the ability to know more about you than was ever dreamed possible. It’s no exaggeration to say that prospective bosses can know more about you than members of your immediate family know. All they need do is purchase the information from one of the hundreds of databases available.

Concerned with rising health care costs and unwilling to take a gamble on “unhealthy” workers, future employers can learn how much snack food you buy, how much sausage you eat, how much booze you drink, whether you belong to a gym, and whether or not you’re lying about being a “non-smoker.”

Concerned with your “moral character” or sexual proclivities, they can retrace your steps on the Internet. Concerned with your political beliefs, they can find out if you subscribe to any left-wing magazines or belong to any

lefty organizations ("Are you now or have you ever been....?"). Access to this information is for sale.

Years ago I began using different initials when joining organizations or subscribing to magazines, in order to track who was selling their lists and who wasn't. It turned out that pretty much everyone was selling access to everyone else. One of the sterling exceptions was MAD magazine, which had an avowed policy of never, under any circumstances, selling its subscription list.

For instance, using the middle initial of "Z" I was disappointed to learn that the ACLU, of all people, had shared my name and address with other "progressive" organizations. I guess they figured that, because I was an ACLU member, I wouldn't object to hearing from the folks at "The Nation" and "Mother Jones" magazine.

As alarming as the NSA's vast database is (Greenwald claims they monitor 120 billion e-mails per month!), there are laws that regulate such surveillance. Granted, even though they get circumvented or ignored, there are, nonetheless, laws on the books that prohibit overreach, which is why Congress investigates them, and why stories of NSA excesses make the front page of the newspaper.

But not for the private sector. Not only is "spying" on consumers and potential employees entirely legal, it doesn't bother most people, because they fear the "government" way more than they fear private business. As far as I can tell, the feds don't know how much sausage I eat or what brand of toilet paper I use. But there's a grocery store chain out there that does know.

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