

Primer for Students: Techno-tonomy Privacy and Autonomy in a Networked World

Technology plays an important role in all of our lives. Just think for a moment about the various technologies that you might encounter over the course of a day. Technology affects very nearly all aspects of your life, and in many respects, has made day-to-day life much easier. It enables you to do things quickly and more efficiently, provides you with the opportunity to access information and people that were previously difficult to access. It also provides you with all sorts of entertainment, whether you are chatting online or downloading your favourite music. On the other hand, these very same technologies can be used to monitor behaviour online. This private information about you can be stored and sold, sometimes without your knowledge. As such, using these new technologies can have a significant impact on your personal privacy. Knowing how to use new technologies, so that you have control of your own private information, makes it more difficult for others to use this information without your permission.

What are “new technologies”?

“New technologies” generally refer to technologies such as internet communication programs, which have emerged and developed over the past 10 years – and particularly those technologies that are interactive in nature, and allow communication between other technologies. The most obvious examples are on the Internet, such as email, real-time online chats, and gaming. We can also plug in a webcam or a digital camera to our computer to transmit digital images. Many of the cell phones on the market today have the ability to access the Internet and can also send text, email, and digital messages from the Internet or even another cell phone. Bluetooth, for example, is a wireless technology that allows nearby devices to connect to each other (otherwise known as a PAN - Personal Area Network). Many cell phones and laptops are equipped with Bluetooth and allow the use of a wireless headset to talk on your cell phone or a wireless connection with nearby computers to exchange information.

Consider for a moment how these technologies might differ from those developed in previous generations, such as the radio or the television. Many of these technologies could not “talk to each other” while today this is more common. On one hand, this interconnectivity makes technology more useful; however, it also has an effect on our personal privacy.

What!! Don't use my computer?

Does this mean that we should avoid technology altogether? Absolutely not. Technology makes our lives easier in many ways. It is a way to communicate with our friends, to make new friends and to learn more about our interests. What we can do is be more aware of some of the consequences of using new technologies, learn how to limit any risks, and develop an understanding of how the law protects our privacy.

Hey that's private!

Most people would agree that privacy is important, and worthy of protection. Many would even argue that we have a “right” to privacy and that it is even a fundamental human right. But what do we mean when we talk about privacy?

What do you think - Why is privacy important?

"My body is private. It is something that's only mine that no one else can touch without my permission."

– Angie, age 13

"My bedroom is my private place, where I have my personal things that I don't always want people to see and where I can just kick back and be myself."

– Jennifer, age 13

"There are some things that I might want to do in private...not because they are things I'm not supposed to be doing...but just things that I don't want the whole world to know about."

– Mo, age 15

Autonomy is one of the values which is revealed in these quotes. Autonomy is defined as the ability to control our own lives, which includes the ability of an individual to control the use of information about her/him and to limit access by controlling outside intrusions.³ Canadian law says that protecting privacy is a means of defending individual autonomy and dignity.⁴

Privacy is essential in a democracy. The right to privacy:

- Allows us to be free from interference from people such as other students, and institutions such as the government;
- Ensures that when we vote in an election no one else will know how we voted;
- Allows us to be open with our doctors without them revealing our private information;
- Permits us to feel that we are safe in our homes, free from wiretapping and other surveillance; and
- Respects our autonomy⁵ - the ability to control our own lives.

"Privacy is much more than the technical control over information, or the mere right to be left alone. It is what enables us to participate in relationships with other people."⁶ Personal privacy is something that we all value and there are many strategies that we can use to retain control over our personal information while online. We all have the right to control the parts of ourselves we wish to reveal to others, and those that we would like to keep personal.

Think about it...

What does privacy mean to you?

How much of yourself do you wish to disclose online?

What can you do to protect your privacy online?

How is protecting your privacy connected to your own personal identity and sense of self?