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## Opinions Word of Mouth

### Should the Government Be Protecting Online Privacy?

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Posted by [Neal Leavitt](#) on February 19th, 2011 at 1:08 am

A few months ago, *The Economist* had a lively online debate about whether more government action is necessary to protect individuals' online privacy. Will this result in excessive government regulation and finally bring to reality Orwellian controls over every detail of our private digital lives?

Marc Rotenberg, president/executive director of the Electronic Privacy Information Center, argued that there's currently no definitive check on private sector data collection. He said companies do post privacy policies on websites and then "do as they wish with the personal information they collect." He makes some good points – some new Internet privacy laws and regulations may be necessary to stop what these companies are allegedly doing.

But Jim Harper, director of information policy studies at the Cato Institute, postulated that "the Internet is not for couch potatoes. It is not an interactive medium. While Internet users enjoy its offerings, they should be obligated in watching out for themselves."

I fall into Harper's camp. The less government intervention/intrusion, the better. And he made a number of cogent arguments. All major browsers currently allow users to control online tracking – with Internet Explorer

and Firefox you simply click on the ‘Privacy’ tab to customize cookie settings – yet few people even take these simple steps to guard their privacy.

Government regulation, Harper argues, “will make consumers worse off than they could be. The better alternative is to get people educated and involved in their own privacy protection.”

To wit, the Electronic Frontier Foundation provides a list of the Top 12 ways to protect your privacy, itemized/condensed as follows:

- Do not reveal personal information inadvertently
- Use cookie management software
- Keep a clean email address
- Don’t reveal personal details to strangers or just-met ‘friends’
- Realize you might be monitored at work, avoid sending highly personal email to mailing lists, and keep sensitive files on your home computer
- Beware of sites offering some sort of reward or price in exchange for your contact information or other personal details
- Do not reply to spammers for any reason
- Be conscious of web security
- Be conscious of home computer security
- Examine privacy policies and seals
- Remember that you decide what information about yourself to reveal, when, why and to whom



- Use encryption

Pretty basic/common sense stuff – if we all put these practices to heart, we’ll keep the government at arm’s length – digitally speaking.

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### 3 Responses to “Should the Government Be Protecting Online Privacy?”

1.  [Jeff Chester](#) says:  
[February 19, 2011 at 3:34 PM](#)

The author should have also said that the Electronic Frontier Foundation is supporting calls for the FTC to establish a Do-Not-Track system. EFF realizes that a single user is relatively helpless today to deal with the growing threats to online privacy--and that its own list you cite are insufficient tools.

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2.  [ken anderson](#) says:  
[February 19, 2011 at 3:52 PM](#)

Agree with Jeff Chester. There is an imbalance in bargaining power, so individuals alone can't do everything required to protect themselves in cyberspace. Recall that for design, the default settings usually rule. Professor Larry Lessig let us view the power of developers and designers through his writings on Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace. It's not one or the other. Like transportation, we need an organized framework and individual diligence.

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3.  [Jim Lai](#) says:  
[February 21, 2011 at 9:55 PM](#)

Most of what you say is true, but it assumes that companies will not (intentionally or inadvertently) act in ways that deceive users or undermine the consent they have already given. When Google launched Buzz and automatically enrolled all Google users in the program, users had no idea that Google intended to make a new use of the information that it collected. And it seems like Facebook does things that appear to subvert user preferences almost daily. And recently, Apple has been sued (twice) for doing things that it expressly stated it would never do.

Individual users cannot control bad actors. Only governments can.

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