

Controversial topic of web privacy

[Sociology](#), [Social Issues](#)



Internet Privacy Violations

The right to privacy is a controversial topic in the age of rapid technological improvement and digitization of information. While the right to privacy is not constitutionally enumerated, it remains fundamental, justifiable on both moral and legal grounds. Privacy is an interest with moral value for people who prize their freedom from scrutiny, and thus, violating privacy in any medium, be it the real world or via the internet, is undeniably wrong on several grounds. Violating privacy on the web is morally wrong according to utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, and the social contract.

When many internet users think about privacy violations online, they may consider several types, from governments digging through Big Data and supposedly secure messages, to individuals 'doxing' others by revealing information about someone else's whereabouts, real name, workplace, and other personal details. One specific interesting example that consists of an individual invading another individual's privacy is one oft-found in real life; consider an online forum where people can post quasi-anonymously under a handle unassociated with their real name. The forum spans a broad range of topics, and each poster's handle can be tracked back to their posts. At first glance, this seems like a relatively safe environment - here, people can have discussions on all manner of topics, free to voice opinions without a link to their identity outside of the forum's walls. However, the anonymity granted is not complete; let's say the user gets into a heated discussion with another user, who digs through their posting history and pulls details from past posts which individually are innocuous, but when put together paint a picture of

the user's life. Maybe they have posted a few comments that reference an annoying boss, a young child, a home renovation to add a pool with associated images that can be tied to a geographic location, a figurine collection that shows off their hobby. Perhaps one that mentions how terrible traffic is in their neighborhood now that a construction crew's started work, or how glad they are that Starbucks baristas never get their three-letter name wrong on the cup. Put together, any self-appointed 'detective' can wreak havoc, pinpointing a name, workplace, address, even phone number. This sort of privacy violation is insidious and deeply personal, unlike the data scraping or social tracking methods utilized by large corporations (though which is worse is up in the air), and at first glance it certainly appears immoral to the layperson. The question, then, is why and how it is so.

A utilitarian argument for the value of privacy may consider that privacy leads to more human well-being than a lack thereof. Privacy is necessary to an individual's sense of personal identity, and a necessary means to freedom of action among members of a society. Thus, the privacy of those online who wish to remain anonymous should be respected, as only with relative anonymity can they retain their self-created identity and be free to voice themselves. Utilitarianism thus supports the idea of online privacy, and implies that violating the privacy of those who would prefer to remain unnamed is morally questionable at best.

Kant takes privacy as a logical implication of the principle of respect for people, and argues that rationality and autonomy are essential prerequisites in the freedom of a moral agent, and if outside forces direct said moral

agent, they cannot be autonomous. For a utilitarian, it is necessary means to an end, while for a Kantian it is conceptually connected to other moral ideas. With Kant, therefore, anonymity online should also be respected, as only with privacy can an agent remain autonomous. For instance, a person who wishes to express controversial views online may feel safer doing so anonymously, simply so that they do not have to face the repercussions of expressing an idea or viewpoint that could draw ire. Similarly, someone who wants to take part in what could be a heated discussion might want to do so at a remove, unconnected with their real name so that they can impersonally express their views.

As an additional example, broader in scope, consider the acquisition of information by governments across the globe on internet users. All perspectives of the social contract seek to explain why rational individuals would give up freedoms for the political order; it is assumed that the state and political order exist for the interest of the people, where life, liberty, and property can be protected. However, the unregulated invasion of privacy for acts like the collection of information about individuals is not acceptable by the social contract, as it transcends normal sovereign behavior. For instance, in the United States, the clandestine National Security Agency has committed a variety of immoral, if not illegal, acts that range from data mining to call tapping. Though the latter is not part of internet privacy, the former very much is; although people who post things on social media are not necessarily wholly entitled to privacy, they are certainly entitled to have the ability to control who views their data, and the social contract does not permit the implicit allowance of government surveillance.

Some might argue that if an internet user wanted to remain private, they should not have exposed themselves by writing anything remotely personal or traceable. One might say that it does not constitute a violation of privacy if the supposed victim placed the necessary on the table themselves.

However, this argument is faulty - people use online handles to remain anonymous, and leaving pieces of their identity about is not the same as being willing to tell the world who they are. In the end, violating someone's privacy online is much the same as violating their privacy in person; it interferes with their well-being and sense of personal identity, as understood under utilitarianism, it detracts from their freedom as a moral agent under Kant, and it breaches the social contract when the violation is condoned or conducted by the government.