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Sociological Imagination

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imberly A. Vogt is Associate Professor of Sociology and Chair of the department of Sociology d Archaeology at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. She earned the M.A. and Ph.D. from e University of New Hampshire. Her research interests include youth homicide, hate crime, and alth risk behaviors among gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth. She is an active ember of the Homicide Research Working Group, an international group of homicide earchers and serves on the editorial board of the journal *Homicide Studies.*

rmen R. Wilson VanVoorhis is Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of sconsin-La Crosse. She earned the M.A. and Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology from Iowa State iversity. Her research interests include non-professional responses to victims of relationship lence, alcohol use among college students, health risk behaviors among gay, lesbian, bisexual transgender youth, as well as the value of active learning exercises in statistics courses. She is ember of both the Midwestern and American Psychological Associations.

The Transformation of Privacy and Anonymity: Beyond the "Right to Be Let Alone"

Jo Ann Oravec
University of Wisconsin-Whitewater

Abstract

Privacy and anonymity as values were once more closely associated with solitude and even hermitage than with active social existences. However, these values are taking on new significance in an age of the Internet; they are becoming more tightly linked with matters of identity management as well as self-determination within profoundly social realms. International interests are also involved as some nations are establishing protection for personal information about their citizens for economic and political reasons, including the goal of stemming the flow of information across their borders. Much of the discourse on information privacy and anonymity is becoming more sophisticated technologically, which is also shaping the character of these values and affecting the kinds of participants who can engage in effective social and political action relating to them. The problem of privacy "have nots" is emerging as many individuals have diminished means through which to conceal "backstage" interactions from the observation of strangers and to manage information about stigmas. In contrast, the day-to-day operations of organizations are increasingly being hidden from view as more citizens interact with them through the Internet instead of face-to-face encounters with organizational representatives. The result is a growing asymmetry and distance between individuals and the organizations that serve them.

Introduction

The availability of virtually free communications and computing will alter the relationships of nations and of socioeconomic groups within nations.

Bill Gates 1996:285

"Privacy" in its various iterations has often incorporated aspects of solitude, seclusion, and social withdrawal. This article contends, though, in many of its recent expressions it has been transformed from a value best described as the "right to be let alone" to one that involves strong social, technological, and political aspects. Privacy values— along with anonymity— are increasingly being associated with the

management of personal and group identity and with self-determination. Privacy protections were once primarily negotiated among households and within neighborhoods; as discussed in this article, households had fuller control of the means to shield their "backstage" operations from the view of outsiders (Goffman 1971) and to manage strategically the stigmatizing information about them (Goffman 1963). However, in the advent of the Internet and personal computer usage, privacy protections are also becoming tightly coupled with specific technological devices and institutional considerations, rather than with informal social mores, negotiations, and the use of props such as fences and window shades. These changes in the character of privacy protections are serving to limit social discourse on these matters to those individuals (often those of higher socio-economic status) who are technologically equipped and have the societal standing required to deal with institutions. This article argues that discourse on privacy should shift to include the interests of the "privacy have nots" worldwide.

International political and economic considerations are also affecting the character of privacy issues. Various nations are reexamining the basic rights of individuals in the advent of the Internet and advanced surveillance technologies, and their intercultural exchanges are serving to alter the character of privacy and anonymity as values. In order to set up systems for global economic exchange in the electronic realm, a number of nations are attempting to establish international agreements about how personal information is to be handled, and the outcomes of these agreements can affect how individuals conduct their everyday transactions. Clearly, global forces (such as those involving privacy) can alter "the experience of everyday life and political forms, [and] transform the ways in which the individual and collective identities can be forged and maintained" (Jowers, Durrschmidt, O'Docherty, and Purdue 1999).

At the same time that organizational access to information about individuals' intimate lives is expanding, organizations themselves are acquiring new means to shield their own "backstage" operations from open view. By moving their channels for client input and complaints to the Internet, organizations can more carefully craft how their clients perceive them. Even the physical location of the building that houses the organization can be unknown to clients, as "virtual organizations" (distributed throughout physical space and connected via computer networks) proliferate (Allcorn 1997). Organizations can also eliminate the need for many human service personnel, who generally give organizational clients some insights as to how the organization works (Lipsky 1980). Often, these human service personnel also assist individuals who are less capable of understanding or dealing with organizational cultures and regulations. The Internet is often associated with open access to organizations and with freedom of information (Henderson 1998). However, websites that provide an electronic "front end" or "edifice" for organizations can be problematic in this regard; organizations can construct any kind of edifice that suits their purposes, even tailoring the edifice for each individual who logs on. Thus individuals are left with few clues as to how the organization works— how their inquiries or requests are being processed and how the information that is collected about them is being used. The negotiations that individuals engage in with each other to create the "common-sense world of everyday life" are complex (Garfinkel 1967:35); these shifts in technology are affording individuals fewer means for communicating with other organizational participants about everyday organizational operations.

Organizations often make it difficult for individuals of certain classes or groups to understand them and to provide effective input into their operations (Futrell 1999) at the same time they maintain the impression of responsiveness to client needs. Such barriers to effective participation are easily arranged, from meeting times that are established during hours that parents are needed at home to reports that are written at a level that everyday citizens cannot understand. An organization's backstage operations — the operations that constitute organizational activity— are important for understanding its overall influence and meaning (Basu and Dirsmith 1999; Star 1999) and also reveal its inconsistencies and failures. The expanded access to individuals' backstage lives along with the increasingly closed access to organizations' own backstage operations are enlarging the asymmetries between individuals and the organizations that supposedly serve them. Coleman (1986) wrote of our increasingly "asymmetric" society in which organizations hold increasing levels of power over individuals, while individuals in turn have dwindling knowledge of and influence over them. The advent of the Internet is serving to make many individuals' social and economic positions less stable in other ways as well, with disruptions in some occupational contexts and social standings (Higley 1999).

Privacy in the Advent of the Internet

Discussions of privacy and anonymity may seem anachronistic in an age characterized by the predominance of information technologies. Data about individuals' attributes are held in dozens if not hundreds of databanks, and images can be disseminated around the globe in seconds. Employers have gained the capabilities to monitor workers' behavior down to the individual keystroke (Cozzetto and Pedeliski 1997). Satellites take photographs of everyday activity in even the most remote countries and capture streams of data through which experts attempt to decipher various civilian as well as military initiatives. Through "geographic information systems" (GIS), intricate portraits of community health patterns as well as international economic activity can be constructed (Richards and Croner 1999). The economic and political values of information are becoming widely recognized worldwide (Rothkopf 1998), and the phrase, "knowledge is power" has become commonplace.

The kinds and quantities of technological observation of citizens' everyday activities are also increasing, and surveillance is considered a major aspect of the character of modern society by a number of social and political theorists (Dandeker 1990; Deetz 1992; Foucault 1979; Oravec 1996). Flaherty (1989) gives twentiethcentury Western

nations the label of "surveillance societies" to reflect the importance and extent of diffusion of surveillancerelated practices. At the level of the individual and group, surveillance has become a casual part of many everyday routines in industrialized societies. Cameras watch customers in shopping malls, computer keystrokes at work are monitored, and Internet surfing expeditions are tracked (Dalton 1998; Lasica 1998). Traces of individuals' activities are captured and analyzed for purposes that include control and supervision, as well as the protection of property and maintenance of social order. In the US, a 1997 American Management Association (AMA) survey of employers shows that 63 percent of those polled use some surveillance or monitoring— and 23 percent do not directly inform workers of these practices— with a polling error of plus or minus 3.5 percent (Jackson 1997).

Along with apparent threats to privacy, computing technology also affords some technologically-literate individuals means for countering various forms of surveillance and data collection. Access to encryption methods and the means to send anonymous electronic mail messages (such as anonymous remailers that remove traces of the original senders' identity) are becoming more common among individuals. The Internet and computer networking in general thus give individuals an opportunity to participate in discussions and other interactions anonymously (if certain precautions are taken), and to manage their personal and household identity through the strategic exchange of information (Turkle 1995; Oravec 1996). Individuals can participate in Internet discussions in chatrooms and newsgroups with few clues as to their identities, and many have taken this opportunity to experiment with different cultural roles and social statuses.

Other kinds of privacy protections are also growing in number and variety. Few of these are automatic protections; individuals must be proactive in defending their privacy against the encroachments of governments and large institutions, a situation that manifests obvious asymmetries of power. For example, individuals with time and institutional sophistication have some limited means of checking and correcting certain records that pertain to them and of "opting out" of some kinds of databases; they can also help protect their families against the encroachments of telemarketers (Romano 1998).

Each of these activities takes time and requires technological and institutional know-how, though. Internet surfers can in certain circumstances work to control the kind of information that is collected about their surfing expeditions (Lasica 1998). Books such as *Protecting Yourself Online* (Gelman 1998) assist those who have some technological capabilities to enhance their own levels of privacy protection. Home security systems have become linked with computer networks, giving household members the means to check their residences from work (Buechner and Dahir 1999), though this may also open their homes up to new forms of surveillance from outsiders. Individuals with sufficient means can also use Caller ID and telephone answering machines to screen calls (Crabb 1999), though the use of Caller ID and comparable technologies is often

more closely associated with privacy violation than support, since it can disclose unlisted telephone numbers and reveal the location of whistle-blowers and battered women (Greengard 1997). In the rhetoric that is often associated with the Internet in corporate advertising and political addresses, the benefits of the networked world are not related to social class and are extended to individuals as soon as they obtain an Internet connection (Herring 1999). However, the mere connection to the Internet does not afford individuals full access to the means by which they can protect their on-line transactions and personal expressions and the institutional and technical know-how to understand how they work. For individuals without technical skill, connection to the Internet can thus produce a siphoning of personal and household information to direct marketing firms, government agencies, and other organizations that are interested in their on-line habits.

Not long ago, individuals and households relied on an assortment of more informal means to create spheres of privacy, from desks in which personal papers could be locked to shutters that blocked the visual access that strangers had to their interactions. Goffman (1971) distinguished the "frontstage" operations of a household from the "backstage": households work to manipulate the impressions that outsiders receive of them so that their intimate domestic operations and transactions can proceed without undue external influence. The privacy norms of communities and other local units (for example, against "snoopers" and "peeping Toms") serve important roles in this impression management process; they often serve as buffers that help households maintain their desired front-stage appearances while back-stage interactions transpire (Sedgwick 1981; Brown-Smith 1998). For example, a marriage that is failing can often be further threatened by public disclosure of its problems, so some level of privacy is especially important (Fox 1998). Architectural barriers (such as doors and walls) can serve as props in the effort to maintain privacy, reducing the possibility of interpersonal exposure (Newell 1995). Even though neighbors can easily peek through closed drapes and hear through plaster walls, those props generally serve as reminders of existent community norms and keep external influence at bay.

In face-to-face interaction, individuals are generally afforded some means for strategically managing information about themselves related to various social stigmas (for example, concerning illnesses). They are given some means to control what others know about them, often by the concealment of information or its selective disclosure. However, in the age of databanks and computer networking these means are severely limited. Thus the cancer patient is not given the means to shield this potentially stigmatizing information from others, including future employers and credit grantors. Societies often afford individuals means for shielding stigma; even childless women in a society that values child bearing are often given the means to "pass" as less stigmatized individuals (Riessman 2000). However, comparable means for shielding stigma are being eroded by information systems, which can convey information related to stigma to various parties without the direct awareness of the stigmatized individual.

The gap that exists worldwide between technology "haves" and "have nots," often labeled as the "digital divide" (Alter 1999), is thus being widened not only by inequities in access to technology but by differences in the time and ability to wield the means for protecting privacy and managing personal and household identity. The availability of technologies for connecting to the Internet is increasing overall, but considerable differences in access to technology by race and social group are still apparent (Irving 1999), which are often exacerbated by associations of high technology with white males of higher socio-economic status (Hildenbrand 1999). Many individuals who possibly have the economic ability to purchase technological means to defend their privacy may not have the technical or institutional know-how to put them into place; such individuals may include those who are time-strapped (with considerable responsibilities at home and at work) and unable to invest time in such projects. Since access to the means to control information about oneself is essential for protecting one's social and economic positions, these developments are serving to disempower even further those who are not technologically literate and equipped, who are often individuals already saddled with various social encumbrances (Gans 1994).

Social Support for Privacy Values

In 1963 House hearings on computer databanks, Representative Cornelius Gallagher (D-New Jersey) vehemently attacked those who would transform citizens into "computerized men," beings that were "stripped of identity and privacy." However, the outrage of individuals concerning privacy invasions is often not well articulated or precisely focused, or is muted in fear of losing employment and social standing. Today, the truck driver whose every turn of the wheel is being monitored by satellite and the computer programmers or data entry clerks whose keystrokes are recorded and analyzed often express concerns that link them to generations past and to cultures far away, and are only roughly captured in the terms "privacy" and "anonymity." With the focus on information as an economic commodity and on technology as a means of control, expressions of despair about the future of privacy rights have been common over the past decades. Many social critics have predicted that privacy as a value is dying out (O'Brien 1997) or is being overshadowed by other substantial values such as freedom of information (Brin 1998). Other commentators have wondered whether "anonymity" (the ability to sever one's communications and markers of identity from oneself) is even attainable, given the growing capabilities for identification through genetic traces, fingerprints, voice recognition technologies, and iris scans (Wilson and Schrader 1998).

Given these dire predictions about our social and technological futures, it may thus be surprising that discourse on information privacy and anonymity as values is still attracting attention as well as generating heat. The growth of information technology as well as international influences and exchanges have transformed our notions of privacy and anonymity in various ways, yet the values have apparently retained their essences and enduring qualities. Expression of these values often gives voice to deep but often

unspecified needs that individuals have for self-determination as well as relief from the unrelenting pressures of society. In the past decades, scholars linked privacy with fundamental beliefs in the uniqueness of individuals and their worth as individual human beings (Westin 1967; Alderman and Kennedy 1997).

In Greece, there is no term that refers to privacy *per se*; a word that is close is "idios," which refers to citizens who choose to neglect their civic duties (Papandreou 1998). In the US, the word "privacy" was in common circulation since the beginning of the nation; however, the "right to be let alone" (Warren and Brandeis 1890) articulated privacy values in possibly their most dramatic and memorable form. Justices Warren and Brandeis wrote about the topic of privacy in order to respond to press intrusions upon close family members as well as to outline formal legal concerns. This expression of privacy— the right not to have one's personal spheres encroached upon by the press, by government, and by other citizens— has played a strong role in formulations of privacy rights in the past century. Privacy as a social object in the US has often been associated with withdrawal and seclusion, reflecting the US's pioneer heritage and tradition. In the mythology associated with frontier eras, when vast expanses of land were available individuals could indeed choose to live a life apart from community or group interaction.

However, with physical and mythological frontiers receding in the US and elsewhere the meaning of privacy has been increasingly intertwined with social and political aspects of human life. Post (1989) goes so far as to claim that privacy is a "living reality" in our society only because we participate in a community. Privacy makes socia lives bearable. Merton (1957) argues that our intensely social existences are only possible because of the buffers that privacy practices afford us. However, the right to opt out completely of the complex webs of information and communications systems that contain data about each of our economic transactions is nearly impossible. Thus unless there are vast systemic changes, the privacy protections for most individuals are thus somewhat limited. Individuals today are indeed afforded such options as not to be included in specific databanks (if they specifically request to do so) and to have some kinds of information (such as credit and financial records) either amended or corrected. As previously mentioned, individuals who have enough technical know-how can also encrypt their conversations and protect their physical records through their home security systems. In conjunction with each other, these means can at least give household members the sense that outsiders are being excluded from access to intimate family details, which in itself may be valuable for supporting family operations (Berardo 1998).

Even though securing privacy is becoming an increasingly sophisticated and technically-oriented pursuit, visceral reactions to privacy violations in the US and other nations are still common in discourse. Instances where privacy has been invaded often trigger an empathetic response, as if the privacy violation of one person affects us all in some way. Even recent kinds of privacy invasions—such as "identity theft," where an

individual's economic identity is taken over by another — elicit deeply-felt emotions and have spawned extensive journalistic coverage (Mannix 1998). International discussions about the notion of privacy — as well as some specific legislative efforts — were generated by the death in 1997 of Princess Diana, which was apparently in part related to her quest to avoid paparazzi (Long 1997). The need to have some time "off camera" is apparently a human trait, even for those who understand the nature of publicity and use it to advance various social purposes. Although few citizens are chased by photojournalists many have expressed feelings of disquiet as they have seen their personal privacy diminished for commercial reasons, as reflected in survey results which show that individuals have expressed increasing concern about their personal privacy over the past several decades (Shapiro 1999). Often, however, individuals have knowingly if reluctantly traded their privacy for certain conveniences — such as credit cards and rebate programs. On the Internet, the tradeoff between personal privacy and monetary reward is made even more straightforward as a number of websites offer individuals money for revealing their detailed personal information (O'Brien 1997).

Interest in privacy and anonymity as values has been sustained in the past decades despite the lack of strong political structures and explicit social safeguards to support them. Few nations have strong constitutional safeguards for privacy. Most have protections that are of a "patchwork" quality: the right of privacy is inferred from combinations of various legislative and constitutional protections. In the US, the Constitution does not directly mention a right to "privacy" (or "anonymity," either). The character of the public response to privacy concerns has changed somewhat as information technology has permeated society. Public opinion has reflected increasingly strong interest in privacy issues over the past decades in most Western nations, but has also revealed a willingness to trade off privacy concerns for other social values, such as convenience or economic factors (Quade 1993). In the 1950s and 60s, it was common for discourse about privacy and anonymity to attack the very existence of databanks and the assignment of identification numbers to individuals. For instance, the public reacted strongly against the notion of a "National Data Center," which was seriously presented by the Johnson Administration in the US. The Center was intended as a centralized repository for information about individual US citizens; various kinds of records would be kept together there. In Sweden, distrust of large databanks triggered the cessation of a massive long-term study of citizens (Flaherty 1993). The widespread outrage that plans for these computer-based repositories stimulated may seem anachronistic today, as large, tightly-networked databanks routinely collect and disseminate records containing revealing information about citizens.

With the worldwide attention to the Internet and to computer networking in general — along with euphoria about an "information society" — discourse on information-related values has shifted in most nations. Few scholars and leaders in public policy arenas are demanding that computer databanks stop accumulating information about individuals. However, many are arguing that individuals be given various forms of

control over the information that is being held about them, whether those controls be voluntary on the part of industry (the current trend in the US) or imposed by government, the trend in some European nations (Bennett 1997). There are also many calls on the political scene for the control of the flow of information about citizens across borders, coupled with other demands for cultural protection, such as control over information that is entering these borders (Blume 1997).

Privacy discourse has also been changing in its characterization of the use of a "standard identification number" (or SUI) to refer to citizens, a persistent issue in information management. As stated in the currently-renamed US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) report on privacy (1979), an SUI is a "systematically designed label that, theoretically at least, distinguishes a person from all others" (p. 109). On its face, the assignment of a number to citizens may seem relatively benign, given the vast amounts of data collected about them: the SUI is yet one more piece of data. However, the notion of an SUI has triggered broadly-based concern in the US as well as other nations. In its report, HEW argued that the SUI would have an assortment of practical advantages for US citizens: it would allow for easier updating and merging of records for administrative and research purposes. However, these efficiency values were overweighed in popular and political opinion by concerns about privacy, and the plans for instituting an SUI were dropped. However, the social security number has indeed served as a *de facto* SUI, linking the various records belonging to an individual (although it is by law intended only to refer to records relating to social security and certain other limited functions).

Fear of an SUI has many linkages to important societal factors. In past decades, many citizens opposed implementation of an SUI because of its symbolism; the assignment of a number to an individual was deemed distasteful by many. The "mark of the beast" is still referred to in popular discourse on SUI implementation: it is a Biblical reference containing a warning to its readers about how individuals can be controlled (Wyld 1995). Focuses on the SUI today are generally on its more pragmatic aspects. Recently, passage of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act with its creation of a unique patient identifier increased the intensity of discourse on privacy-related matters. The number would be used for linking an individual's medical history over time (Stolberg 1998). In part due to the pressure of public opinion, the Clinton Administration dropped its support of the identifier, and its status is in question. SUI and related controversies remain heated, although with the current state of computing technology, individuals can be associated with data from various databases without a unique identification number.

Privacy as a value has received support from an eclectic assortment of sources. From George Orwell's (1963) novel *1984* to recent films such as *The Truman Show* (a 1998 Paramount Pictures release), artistic efforts have served as reminders of the importance of privacy. Books by Nicholas Papandreou (1998) and Ellen Alderman and Caroline Kennedy (1997) provide accounts of the levels of privacy and anonymity of public

figures. These narratives underscore the roles of privacy and anonymity in everyday life, more specifically of the needs individuals have not to be recognized and attract social attention in certain contexts. In recent years, anonymity has also been buttressed as a value by managerial research and practice that demonstrate the usefulness of free and creative expression in organizations, expression that is not directly tied to a specific individual's identity (Cooper and Gallupe 1998). From brainstorming to on-line virtual meetings, anonymity has played an increasingly strong role in managerial practice. On the Internet, anonymous exchanges have elicited an assortment of experimental and creative approaches toward communications, as individuals experiment with their identities as well as with ideas. Unfortunately, the kinds of privacy and anonymity that the Internet supports have also undergone attacks as individuals have used them to shield illegal activity, harass individuals, and to promulgate hate materials (Herring 1999).

International Influences Concerning Privacy

Along with the technological considerations previously outlined, international influences have also played a role in shaping privacy values. The opportunity to participate in the "global village" or "cyberspace" (with its linkages to electronic commerce opportunities) is influencing political and social conditions in many nations. National economic and security interests are being linked to how well nations can control the information that leaves their own borders as well as collect information about other countries' activities. As global commerce is conducted via the Internet and through other technological means, some level of harmonization of privacy rights is beginning to occur for reasons that include openly political ones. Largely because of the European Union's influence, some international understandings are being wrought pertaining to how information about individuals is to be handled; more such understandings will be put into place as international commerce is increasingly conducted via computer networking. The European Union's directive on privacy matters prohibits the distribution of information about its citizens to nations that do not have acceptable privacy safeguards in place (Rodger 1998). Cultural differences among nations concerning privacy values are not likely to be eradicated entirely, but with these agreements may emerge widespread changes in how information is viewed and the informational interests of citizens are treated.

Other kinds of international exchanges concerning privacy have also been influential. Nations that have eroded some of their privacy protections are sometimes prodded to rekindle their emphases on privacy by force of world opinion. For example, it was admitted in Irish Parliament proceedings that a basic motive for passing the 1988 Data Protection Bill was a concern that Ireland would otherwise be considered as a data haven by other nations (Clark 1997). The US government's efforts to block its citizens from access to encryption technologies were partially nullified by worldwide opinion as well as the widespread dissemination of these technologies internationally (Ackerman 1998).

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Particular nations have had a strong effect on privacy discourse largely by providing egregious examples of privacy violations. For instance, some nations have indeed emphasized internal surveillance, and have served as dystopian examples of how privacy rights can be eroded with the assistance of technology. The former nation of East Germany had political regimes that serve as frightening examples of how information collection practices can affect the political and personal expression of everyday citizenry; the technologies of photography and wiretapping aided in their efforts (Miller 1998). Other examples of the use of technology for societal control are Singapore's application of advanced surveillance equipment to monitor its citizens (*Economist* 1998) and Thailand's "Population Information Network" (Ramasoota 1998) both of which are often considered problematic by many human rights experts.

The privacy violations associated with Watergate in the US have served as a bad example of government encroachment, and stimulated worldwide concern about privac The post-Watergate era in the US stimulated a bevy of privacy-related bills and related research activities across the globe. The Fair Information Practices and the Privacy Act of 1974 were two results of this period. The Fair Information Practices were developed through the efforts of a large group of industry and government experts in the US and have retained a place in privacy discourse. In the same time period, several European nations initiated considerable legislative and social agendas relating to privacy, most of which had some linkage to the Fair Information Practices (Flaherty 1993). The Practice were explored and adapted through the work of several international organizations in th 1970s, including the Council of Europe and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. The Practices relate to an assortment of concerns about information handling, including the potential that governments have to accumulate "secret" record keeping systems and other privacy and freedom of information issues.

Passage of privacy legislation in most nations is better characterized as a haphazard process driven by circumstance than a concerted effort to protect citizens' rights (Bennett 1997). For example, many privacy protections in the US were stimulated by the efforts of criminals and politicians to cover their tracks. Major legislation affecting privacy in the banking industry was spearheaded by a court case in which the financial records of a suspected criminal were released. The embarrassment that Judge Robert Bork suffered when video rental records were produced at his Senate Confirmation hearings for the US Supreme Court triggered the passage of the Video Rental Privacy Act of 1988. Since the 1970s, privacy legislation has had lower priority in the US than has had in many other countries. Germany and France have had data protection boards with some level of regulatory clout since 1978; Great Britain, Australia, and Canada have also had boards for nearly two decades. Among other nations with permanent dat protection boards are Austria, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden (Eder 1994).

Privacy and Anonymity as Societal Luxuries: Privacy "Backlashes"

The word "privacy" emerged as a force in literature and political philosophy in the sixteenth centuries, and its linkage to Reformation ideology is strong (Huebert 1997). The implementation of privacy measures is in many senses revolutionary, giving an emphasis to individuals and their rights over some of the current operating requirements of institutions (such as institutions' needs for identification and tracking of personnel). One of the most consequential backlashes against privacy has been mounted by corporate and governmental administrators who maintain that organizational efficiency in data handling is more important than maintaining privacy protections for individuals (Flaherty 1993). Thus along with the discourses worldwide that are supporting and transforming privacy and anonymity are those that are questioning whether the price of privacy is too high— whether the social costs of providing means for information control by individuals make privacy a luxury that societies cannot afford.

Part of this backlash against privacy includes the rationale that information is valuable largely for its economic value, and that personal or emotional values relating to information should take secondary positions. Some nations and even individual states or cities benefit monetarily from the capture and sale of information about their citizens, in effect, becoming "information brokers" (Daniel 1997). For instance, the State of Minnesota markets a catalogue to direct marketers of the databases it makes available and in other ways encourages the sale of personal information about citizens. The levels of privacy and anonymity that individuals are afforded reflect important aspects of the relationships between citizens and the governments and organizations with which they participate, and governments that choose to become information brokers place their citizens in the roles of data subjects. Questions about whether an emphasis on privacy would diminish other rights, such as freedom of the press, have long been popular in discourse on privacy (Brin 1998). Some forms of medical privacy may keep research data from being used in beneficial ways by scientists (Etzioni 1999; Rubinstein 1999), although means can be put into place to protect individual privacy in this arena (Riis and Nylenna 1991). Some psychologists have even labeled an interest in privacy as dysfunctional, blocking individuals from needed intimacy (see Brown-Smith 1998). In this formulation, "healthy" human beings choose to reveal their inner secrets and expose their opinions and ideas to others without a need for secrecy or self-censorship.

Critics of privacy and anonymity often directly attack the notion that there was a "golden age" of privacy, a time before the encroachments of modern technology in which individuals could choose to be free from the intrusions of society. Nock (1998) claims that the small town dweller of the past centuries had far less privacy than the average citizen today, and Posch (1995) asserts that today's employees have more privacy than their predecessors despite their employers' use of sophisticated computer surveillance gear. Many of the critics of privacy just described have served to stimulate debate on privacy matters, often keeping alive issues that are otherwise buried under the weight of other pressing social and economic concerns. However, a substantial threat to privacy as a value is coming from the growing complexity and technological intricacy of privacy matters, which often places discourse on these topics out of the reach of everyday citizens (and many societal leaders as well). Whether overly technological notions and associations of privacy and anonymity can capture their emotional and moral aspects for individuals who find it a struggle to keep up with technology changes is doubtful. Privacy and anonymity have survived as values in part because they are linked with long histories of rich and varied expression (as previously described), including dramatic artistic statements and emphatic political writings. Focus on strategies for quantifying and precisely specifying privacy and anonymity may eventually serve to diminish their essential aspects, however much these strategies are required to prevent certain technological intrusions. The strategies and their related discourse may not able to capture the outrage that individuals feel when information they consider private is needlessly exposed, or the helplessness they feel in their encounters with the large and powerful institutions that have personal information about them.

Sociological Imagination

The Societal Uses of Anonymity

Privacy and anonymity are closely associated social objects. Along with privacy, anonymity can also be considered as providing relief from the considerable demands society places on individuals. In many circumstances in our lives, we are effectively anonymous whether or not we intend to be. For example, in the context of a crowded lecture hall or big city, whether or not we want someone to recognize us or know our names, no one does. Public figures who have lost the ability to be anonymous often claim that the quality of their personal lives has been greatly diminished as a result. Exposure of family operations to the media for whatever reason (for example, a newsworthy event related to the family) can be devastating to its continued functioning (Fox 1999).

Anonymity is often associated with the protection of the individual against retaliation for the expression of unpopular ideas. The US Supreme Court has reaffirmed the individual's right to engage in anonymous speech: "Anonymity exemplifies the purpose behind the Bill of Rights, and of the First Amendment in particular: to protect unpopular individuals from retaliation and their ideas from suppression — at the hand o an intolerant society" (*Mcintyre v. Ohio Elections Commission*, 115 S.Ct. 1511, 1524, 1995). However, the notion of anonymity has been associated with the horrific acts of faceless mobs as well as the selfless acts of good Samaritans. It thus has received mixec press. The masks or identity shields that protect group members from retaliation can also apparently diminish their senses of responsibility. In the context of political life, th widespread use of the "Australian Ballot" has tightened the couplings between political expression and anonymity.

Centuries ago, it was considered unsophisticated in many quarters for authors to attach their names to their writings. For example, in the seventeenth century, many

authors needed to be prodded to claim authorship of a written work, and pseudonyms were common (Lohisse 1973). Often, however, anonymity has served as a much-needed protection, with authors assuming its shield because their ideas put them in danger of retaliation. Today, in many community, organizational, or group contexts, individuals make a conscious choice of whether or not to be associated with a particular idea—whether or not to place significant personal markers on a statement, decision, or other intellectual product. Gergen (2000) declares that on the Internet, "identities can be put forward that may not be linked in any specific way to the concrete existence of the participants, and these cyber-identities may carry on active and engaging relationships." Individuals can contribute to various newsgroups without revealing their identities (Joinson 1999), which can present problems if threats or libelous comments are levied. Although anonymity can be problematic, it has many adamant defenders: for instance, Traska (1996:10) asserts that "the right of an author to be and remain anonymous is important to both the author and society."

Given the levels of social control that nations and even individual organizations can and do place upon their participants, that anonymity has endured as a value at all is perhaps surprising. For example, traces of our DNA can identify us with great accuracy, making the very notion of anonymity problematic in physical realms; genetic tests "can disclose not only a person's genetic makeup but also his or her medical history, use of drugs, diet, the presence of sexually-transmitted diseases, and predisposition to disease" (Hurd 1990: 251). In informational realms, however, anonymity can still serve some functions that are especially important. Many individuals have information that is of value to their nations or organizations, but which they cannot relinquish because of fear of personal reprisal; anonymity can afford the means for delivering this information. The organizational suggestion box is one time-honored means for disseminating such information; whistleblower hotlines are yet another. The Internet and computer networking in general have extended the forms of anonymity and linked it with various kinds of free expression. For example, IBM's *Groupsystems* allows for anonymous communications in meetings so that employees can express themselves without fear of reprisal (Oravec 1996).

Anonymity on the Internet often has the practical value of breaking down cultural and social barriers. For example, the following encounter between a web designer (a Kuwaiti muhajibah, or religious woman who veils) and her client was made possible through anonymity:

> Under normal business relations, it would have been uncomfortable for this woman to meet with the owner of the cafe because of the cultural sanctions against the mixing of genders beyond family relations. Instead, the Web designer directed the Internet café owner to meet her in cyberspace through IRC at a particular time on a particular channel (Kuwait Channel 2 on IRC). The designer

> gave the cafe owner her nickname so that he could identify her. From IRC, they entered a cyberprivacy room where the designer could talk with the cafe owner about his advertising needs (Wheeler 1998:369).

Although many uses of anonymity protections to modify personal identities are recreational, anonymity also can allow participants in communications to expand their spheres of interaction, and may eventually help to erode some of the barriers that block unfettered communications. Such demonstrations of the usefulness of anonymity as that related by Wheeler may serve to buttress its value and encourage its intercultural dissemination.

Some Conclusions and Reflections: Privacy in an Asymmetric Society

Privacy and anonymity are enduring values. Although they have both changed in character through the centuries and across nations, they have had a lasting influence on the essence of our personal and political lives. Although privacy is often linked with individuals' intimate spheres and interpersonal relations, large-scale political and economic factors are influencing the direction of privacy practices. Nations that want to play a strong role in global enterprise with other information-based economies will need to take at least some privacy considerations into account in handling personal information, whatever emphases they place on human rights within their own borders. In the years to come, nations that are new to advanced technology will be reacting to these influences and making new and possibly different contributions to discourse on privacy.

As we enter new technological eras— and face new personal and societal challenges— discourse concerning the value of privacy and anonymity is becoming linked more tightly to issues of self-determination and active identity management. These values are thus becoming more directed toward our roles as active social entities. More information is being collected about us than ever before, and some individuals are demanding (and often receiving) limited means for protecting their privacy. Steve Case (1998:433), [former] CEO of America Online, contends that "privacy is one of those issues that transcends the regulatory and legislative challenges and even rises above the public policy discussion," although he notes that many of the benefits of the Internet require exchange of personal information. In turn, however, many organizations are erecting "electronic edifices" that can block the access of individuals to their backstage operations. Although individuals are able to obtain more of some kinds of information about organizations through the Internet (for example, various official publications and reports, as described in Prentice and Richardson 1999) information about the inner workings of organizations are often diminished in quality. At the same time, organizations are gaining new means for the surveillance of everyday citizens. These changes in combination have the potential to increase dramatically the alienation of individuals as they serve the role of "data subjects" in relation to increasingly remote institutions (Daniel 1997)

Computer networks are making information about citizens and the minute aspects of their behavior more widely available; in doing so, they are also exposing details that have considerable economic value. Cultural differences are affecting the character of current discourse on privacy; for example, the onslaught of computer technology in other nations, as well as the flow of data about citizens, is often strongly associated with "Americanization" (Curry 1996) and thus some privacy measures are designed in part to curtail US influence abroad. Some nations (including those in the European Union) that wish to retain high levels of economic and cultural self-determination are working to establish data protection safeguards for information about their citizens. Attempts to move the discussion about privacy even more firmly into the international arena (as well as into the technological realm) include the efforts of the International Information Security Foundation (I2SF) to develop international standards for security and privacy protection (*Information Systems Security* 1999). I2SF is a group that includes representatives from various countries, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), and other organizations.

Computer technology is precise and exacting in nature, which is indeed affording its users the opportunity to specify individual as well as national values concerning privacy in technological ways. For example, the European Union has begun to clarify more precisely whether and how data are to flow through European nations, and to outline more completely the circumstances of such information transfers. They are already influencing a number of nations to rethink their information privacy stances (Bennett 1997; Frost 1998). Those who are knowledgeable about the intricacies of information privacy issues are also being given some means to protect their privacy if they are proactive in working with credit agencies and other organizations in doing so. Through various computer network applications, encrypted communications, and home security devices, individuals are beginning to gain advanced capabilities for ensuring some level of privacy as well as managing (and exploring) their own identities.

However, the advantages just outlined pertain to only a limited number of citizens. Those with advanced technical backgrounds and who are savvy in dealing with institutions will indeed be able to work to protect themselves, and will be able to participate in the increasingly-complex discussions of how privacy and anonymity are to be implemented in an information age; unfortunately, only a portion of society falls into this category. For many individuals, the stigmas attached to various illnesses and other conditions will thus be enhanced by their widespread dissemination through computer networking, further depriving those individuals of the means to maintain an acceptable social standing. This "privacy have not" situation is not likely to be mitigated soon. "Privacy studies" are not yet taught in schools (Johnston 1998; Oravec 1999), and there are few direct efforts by governments to expand the privacy consciousness of citizens. Although a "digital divide" between individuals who have access to computing and the Internet and those who do not has been recognized by corporate and political leaders (Alter 1999), these related privacy-related disparities have not been widely

acknowledged. Widespread consciousness of privacy issues could help to undermine data collection systems, systems that most governmental and corporate concerns have a great deal of investment in. As decisions about privacy and anonymity become technica ones, some informed and technically sophisticated individuals may indeed be able to secure more control over their communications and personal information, but many individuals (largely from lower socio-economic levels) will not.

As discussed in this article, privacy and anonymity provide opportunities to reflect on and evaluate ideas and plans in ways that are less heavily restricted by social and political pressures. These opportunities play a large role in processes of self-definition and individuation, and should not be restricted to those with requisite technological literacy and leisure time. There are many corporate and governmental interests that run counter to privacy concerns and that are serving to endanger privacy as a value. However, the dystopian image of a society whose citizens do not have the liberty to create their own life stories— but whose lives are entirely narrated in computer databanks— may indeed be frightening enough to keep global attention directed to privacy issues.

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