

Rights to Privacy

Will Holcomb

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One writer defines privacy as "freedom from the inappropriate judgment of others." Is this a good definition of privacy? Why or why not? Suppose we use this definition. Should people have a positive right (claim-right) for this kind of privacy? Why or why not? Should people have a negative right (liberty) for this kind of privacy? Why or why not?

I remember watching one of the electronic frontier foundation movies the last time I had this class and some long haired hippie fellow defined privacy as "the ability to pretend that you are like everyone else." I think that definition ties in with the statement in the prompt and I agree with both. I think that the value of privacy is inversely proportional to the strength and rigidity of social strictures. The more confining the rules the more beneficial it will be to individuals to be able to avoid sanctions.

I think that the term "inappropriate" is an important one. Privacy is, to combine in the second statement, the ability to avoid being understood by someone else. Certain information is reserved to prevent someone else from forming a certain conceptualization. I don't know if "inappropriate" is always applicable though. People are not always entirely behind their actions. Take porn sites, I'd venture the majority of porn site subscribers would like to keep their activities a secret. That doesn't mean though that they all believe that there is nothing deviant or perverted about looking at pornography. The term "inappropriate" for me ties in with the idea of the person keeping the secret believing that the conceptualization being formed is erroneous. Motivations are often mottled though and people sometimes believe themselves to be doing wrong, but still do it. In these cases they may well believe that the judgment is "appropriate", i.e. true, but would still want to avoid it.

What rights do people have to privacy? It is certainly a difficult question. It involves balancing individual liberties with overall societal good and there is no simple answer. I personally think that it is an important component of moral and intellectual development that a person have a reasonably large amount of freedom to make decisions and suffer the consequences. Structuring society to provide too much oversight and control in the end is counter productive because of how it causes people to develop. It is also important though to have accountability and a reasonable expectation of safety.

Presenting a blanket statement on privacy is very difficult given the breadth of the subject. I certainly think that in any situation where there is not a clear danger to the safety of other people that individuals have both a liberty and claim-right to privacy. I am one of few people in the class who has had a governmental security clearance. I got it while working on the missile defense program while on co-op. "The government" does not exist. The government is made up of lots of people, the vast majority of whom are just normal people off the streets. Increasingly information really is power, not just in some philosophical sense of self-efficacy, but the power to alter the world. In the end it is individuals who hold that power and allowing it to become concentrated will always be dangerous.