

OPINIONS

MY VIEW: J.T. "TOM" JOHNSON

# Privacy is not an either/or concept

Recent discussions surrounding the U.S. government's data trapping, harvesting and mining of information have triggered cries of indignation and fear about citizens' loss of liberty of association, free speech and privacy.

But almost without exception, those perceived losses — and especially that of privacy — are presented in either/or, bi-model terms. We either have those rights or we don't; we have lost them or we did not.

Yet, the argument is much more complex in the digital age. Issues should be raised that are not fully recognized and addressed in the U.S. This is because the term "privacy" is usually too sweeping, an all-encompassing generalization that ignores multiple definitions and applications that depend on time, place, context and circumstance.

While rights of privacy are often presented as a basic aspect of citizenship, citizens exist in communities, social milieus of multiple degrees of separation between individuals.

Aspects of "private" have implications for social groups ranging from the family to the nation. Consequently, it is to the nation's disadvantage to see

privacy as an either/or proposition. Consider a two-axis matrix or quadrant diagram often used by analysts and decision-makers.

Imagine a horizontal axis representing a continuum called privacy. One end reflects those things that an individual would never share with anyone. These are not just thoughts or fantasies, but perhaps one's genetic code, the presence of a serious blood disease or aspects of brain function.

To make such information available to anyone could have unanticipated consequences for the family, job, insurance coverage or future members of the familial line.

The other end of the privacy continuum represents that data we might always want to be public. Your public home address becomes important when the fire department's digital maps show the fastest route in case of a fire.

Now consider a vertical axis representing data on a "value to the community" continuum. The top end of that axis represents some maximum, highly important value. The bottom end suggests, "It doesn't matter at all at this time."

Community value data? Public

health departments need to know how many individuals of what age or gender carry an infectious disease. Planners of economic development, utilities, parks and recreation — essentially, all government agencies — also need similar private data for the benefit of the commonweal.

That requires as many people in a society as possible to hand over multiple aspects of the data on their personal continuum of privacy so that data can be folded into the analysis of larger community patterns. Those communities can be geographic, but also reflect ethnicity, gender, age and economic or educational strata.

The collection process and the data driving decisions must be the best possible if good decisions are to be made for the community. In this case, that means citizens — believing they are in control of their own data — have voluntarily supplied the best data they could without fear of retribution or even identification.

But the potential for identification is always lurking because individuals in America, unlike in many other nations, cannot and do not control their private variables. Privacy commissions exist in



many countries ranging from Andorra to Thailand. These generally are designed to assure that individual citizen can determine which data aspects of their life they choose to release to other individuals, agencies or corporations and for what purposes.

There are no privacy commissions or agencies with real power in the United States that focus on assisting the individual in guarding his or her personal data. We have handed that power to institutional and corporate interests — government at all levels and the Googles, Yahoos, Facebooks and AT&Ts of America. We have done

so with little thought of the implications for the individual or society.

Can data analysts use the two-axis concept to benefit the nation, to develop better insights for education, health or economic efficiencies? Yes. But how to do so while simultaneously giving the individual the right to control any and all of his or her personal, private data — as circumstance and context change over time — is the socio-political challenge for our nation in the digital age.

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