

Podcast Transcript

Abridged Transcription of NPR's Note to Self Podcast Episode: "Introducing: The Privacy Paradox"

Original recording can be found at [t-t.site/note-self-2](https://www.teachingtolerance.org/note-to-self-2).

Suggested pausing points with teacher instructions are noted in bold.

Manoush [I've heard] so many stories from you listeners about how you love the convenience of living online, but you don't like what little control you have over where your personal information goes or who can see it, and you told us you feel like you don't have much of a choice, like Laura from Hoboken, New Jersey.

Laura I am a stay at home mom getting ready to reenter the workforce, and now I need to make sure I'm searchable and share a lot of information about myself because it's vital to getting a new job, and I'm feeling really conflicted between the two things that are really important to me, one being privacy and the other about being I guess perceived as relevant.

Manoush Or Emily from Toronto.

Emily I'd always just grown up with this separation of the real world and the internet world where people can just know whatever they want and that's my internet life, but no actually it's super invasive. Just because it's online doesn't mean that it's actually different. It's still your life.

Manoush ... Welcome to this special episode of Note to Self. I'm Manoush Zomorodi ...

We'd started trading free apps and services for our personal information, and the government decided in order to keep us safe it needed all that information too, but as we move into a future where our every click, search and like, is tracked and quantified, we've begun to wonder, all that data compiled somewhere without our say, how is it being used to know and nudge and maybe influence us? And what if we decide we're not okay with algorithms affecting every aspect of our existence? We don't want to opt out or go off the grid, but is there a better way? A way to put us, the people, back at the center of the web? That's what I wanted to know, and this project is about what we can do together.

Once upon a time, privacy meant something very simple: "leave me alone!" — but the meaning of privacy began to change as we stopped dialing up and started staying connected, sharing and doing our business online all day long. As Pew Research puts it, in the 21st century we think of privacy less as solitude and more as the right to control our identity and our information, and Pew

finds that 74 percent of Americans agree that that right is very important... We all want our financial details to be secure.

I would also add that we all want our nation's infrastructure, our roads, electric grids, train tracks, we want them to be safe too. ... In our survey, thousands of you also mentioned something else you were concerned about — that creepy feeling you get online when ads are just a little too on the nose, or when voice control keeps popping up and won't turn off on your new iPhone. You can't quite put your finger or your cursor on it, but all the things bother you, and if we care so much about protecting our information and we feel uneasy about it, why do we keep giving it away? Researchers call this question the privacy paradox.

- Prof. Acquisti We are all, or most of us, interested in privacy.
- Manoush Professor Alessandro Acquisti studies the behavioral economics of privacy at Carnegie Mellon University. ... Alessandro says our actions rarely echo our words when it comes to privacy.
- Prof. Acquisti We want more privacy. We want more control over personal information. In actions, we seem to be quite confident and happy with revealing even sensitive information with strangers online.
- Manoush So we talk the talk but we don't walk it, but why? Because, researchers say, we suffer from immediate gratification bias and hyperbolic discounting. Basically, fancy words for impulse posting.
- Prof. Acquisti When you reveal personal information, you upload a family photo on Facebook, you get usually an immediate benefit.
- Manoush I've observed this in myself and just anecdotally talking to people. This moment where you're like, 'This new app looks super cool. Okay I'm going to sign up for it. Oh... they want me to accept all these terms of services. I'm not going to read them all. I'm a terrible person. I'm giving away my identity and information, but I really want to use this app and it's so easy. Just click accept. Okay done. Okay forget it, let's not think about it anymore.' It's like this split second of ickiness, and then the convenience just always seems to outweigh the icky feeling.
- Prof. Acquisti Exactly. We tend to gratify our current self and we push cost on our future self.
- Manoush Instagram likes, click. Download a game to play in the long airport security line. Who cares about privacy when the instant gratification of the internet is so instantly satisfying? Sure there are those [00:07:30] nightmare stories, but what are the odds it's going to happen to you? As Alessandro says, your future self will probably be fine. The worst that will likely happen is you feel violated by all the companies and maybe the government tracking you along with everyone else, but we can live with that icky feeling, or can't we? Melissa in Brooklyn says the icky feeling is haunting her.

Melissa I think about privacy issues probably 80 percent of the days that I use Facebook.

Manoush So the lack of privacy is gnawing at us, and sometimes the information we give away does come and bite us on the butt. In our survey, many of you sent us stories of personal privacy lost. One man said his religious wife filed for divorce after Facebook changed its settings and revealed to her that he belonged to an atheist Bible study group. ...

Richard in San Diego is in the military. His wife, now ex, tried to prove he had cheated on her by doing research online and taking what she found to his commanding officer.

Richard She hacked my social media accounts and my email account and compiled all the information she thought was evidence and sent a package to my CO [commanding officer] of the command I was at. The CO called me into his office and interrogated me for three hours. I didn't get in trouble at all, and what I did get was a better awareness of my privacy.

Manoush We even heard from a U.S. congressman.

Rush Holt Hi, it's Rush Holt. For years I was in the U.S. Congress, and I was really creeped out by what the NSA was doing and how much they were lying about it.

Manoush Listeners reported seeing their own emails in Wikileaks stumps and being followed by stalkers. The list goes on. Some of us are fearful for our personal safety. Mostly, we're just fearful of public embarrassment or hassles, but when does an individual's worry turn into a systemic one? What about the worst case scenarios? ...

Is having ourselves and our information laid out for governments and advertisers to graze on just a fact of digital life? What's it going to take to repair the privacy paradox? ...

So the paradox is that we care about privacy. We care a lot, but we don't do anything about it, or really we don't know if there's anything we can do about it. It's just part of living in the digital age, right? How did we even get here? Take the terms of service. Day in, day out, we click "agree." When did signing something that takes away your right to your own information become so normal?

In our Note to Self privacy survey we asked thousands of you, 'How do you feel when a company asks you to agree to its terms of service?' More than a third of you, 37 percent, said that you feel resigned. This is the deal that we make to get convenient stuff, no choice about it. A quarter of you feel annoyed. The length of these things and the legalese is ridiculous. Another quarter feels guilty like you should read them but you don't. ... Just 8 percent of you felt indifferent. There's lots of negative emotion around terms of service. Other words some of you used were angry, manipulated, bullied. How did we get here to a point where to use the stuff that we need all day long first we have to feel so bad? For this, we turn to the retired Harvard professor at the nexus of this question.

Prof Zuboff We think of the internet as a democratizing influence, and that is true. That is absolutely true, but what's different is the kind of capitalism that is being built on top of that process.

- Manoush To describe this new kind of capitalism, Shoshana Zuboff coined the term surveillance capitalism.
- Prof Zuboff I'll begin with a company that I consider to be the ground zero of surveillance capitalism, which is Google. Google is to surveillance capitalism in the 21st century what General Motors was to managerial capitalism and mass production in the 20th century.
- Manoush General Motors was the world's largest motor vehicle manufacturing company. It drove the U.S. economy for much of the 1900s. Fast forward to the turn of this century and you can see the birth of a new kind of corporation. That's when Google perfected their algorithms to let us search for absolutely anything online, and then the founders started experimenting. Experimenting with different ways to turn those algorithms into dollars, and they discovered the money wasn't in search. It was in the people doing the searching – us.
- Prof Zuboff What they discovered was that they can take these traces of our behavior, the digital breadcrumbs, things that nobody cares about, and they discovered that by scooping all of that up and organizing it and analyzing it, they could do something that comes very close to predicting our behavior.
- Manoush You know what that's like. Ads for that pair of sneakers that you looked at online, then following you around from your laptop to your phone, or the algorithm that deduces, 'I might be interested in hiring a divorce attorney because I Googled summer vacations and studies show divorce rates tend to spike after the summer break,' and so do Google searches for divorce attorneys.
- Prof Zuboff So here's where we veer away from the General Motors style of capitalism. What General Motors and Google have in common is that they're both pioneers. In General Motors' case, it made things that it sold to us and it hired us to help make those things, so General Motors was dependent upon its populations as the source of employees and the source of customers. In Google's case, what it discovered was the fastest way to make money was to take our data to translate it into predictions about us and to sell it to somebody else who could benefit from knowing what we are going to do soon and later. We become what I call sources of surplus.
- Manoush General Motors sells cars, Google sells us, except now Shoshana reminds us that Google has much more than search or advertising. It offers email and maps and connected devices like the Nest thermostat. Plus the so-called internet of things is coming; connected light bulbs, refrigerators, our clothes, and as a result, it won't just be advertisers who are interested in our behavior to sell us stuff, it's insurance companies that offer us a better deal based on digital feedback from our car or medical companies who see that we get our heart rate up regularly at the gym, they can offer us a good price for life insurance, but that's good for us as consumers, isn't it? Well not if the company has decided they don't want you as a customer because of what you look like or where you come from. Should we care if they can collect and measure all our behavior?

Prof Zuboff The reason that we care about this is that in this process we have blown right by privacy. For millennia, we as a species, as the whole history of humanity, we've been sacrificing and experimenting and fighting and winning freedoms that we associate with things like personal autonomy, like self determination, like free will. These are the aspects of our daily lives, of our experience of self, that make it possible for us to imagine something like democracy.

Manoush Our every click, thought, and action quantified, analyzed, sold, and then used to nudge us to do more clicking and opining and searching so we can be monetized. Is this the system we want to live with? Are free apps enough of a tradeoff? Maybe, or maybe there need to be more checks and balances or an ethical agreement between tech makers and their users, or alternative kinds of technology. Maybe we just need more time offline. I'm not sure, and this is what I want to explore with you listeners because, also, this isn't just about shopping. It's also about basic human rights and dignity and democratic principles. After all ... the government's argument is if all these companies can scoop up all this personal information, why can't we do it too? And the government is. ... But this situation isn't set in stone. We can rewrite the code of online conduct.

There is time for us to make changes before the drip drip drip, the erosion of our privacy just becomes normal, how it's always been done, just the way it is. Deep breath. You are not crazy if you feel uneasy about the future of capitalism and democracy along with ads for that vacation in Mexico that you were thinking about taking, but it's not like you're going to stop clicking yes tomorrow, so what do we do about it?

