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EVALUATIONS

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### Power and Privacy on the Internet

As my [Sunday column](#) hopefully made clear, I'm both disturbed by the expansion of surveillance power in America and pessimistic that the internet era could really turn out any other way. To explore that pessimism a little more, allow me to pivot off an interesting recent passage from a [writer named Jacob Bacharach](#), who's writing in defense of the Millennial generation's willingness to put it all online:

... we now find not only kids, but adults (especially new adults) getting constantly dinged with the dire warning that Social Media Lasts Forever. I think this is probably patently untrue in a purely physical sense; it strikes me as probable that fifty years from now, the whole electronic record of our era will be largely lost in a sea of forgotten passwords, proprietary systems, faulty hardware, and compatibility issues. But it should also be untrue in, dare I say it, the moral sense. Educators and employers are constantly yelling that you young people have an affirmative responsibility not to post anything where a teacher or principal or, worst of all, boss or potential boss might find it, which gets the ethics of the situation precisely backwards. It isn't your sister's obligation to hide her diary; it's yours not to read it. Your boyfriend shouldn't have to close all his browser windows and hide his cell phone; you ought to refrain from checking his history and reading his texts. But, says the Director of Human Resources and the Career Counselor, social media is public; you're putting it out there. Yes, well, then I'm sure you won't mind if I join you guys at happy hour with this flip-cam and a stenographer. Privacy isn't the responsibility of individuals to squirrel away secrets; it's the decency of individuals to leave other's lives alone.

At some point, employers will have to face up to the unavoidability of hiring people whose first Google image is a shirtless selfie. Demographics will demand it. They'll have to get used to it just as surely as they'll have to get used to nose rings and, god help us, neck tattoos. It's a shame, though, that it'll be compulsory and reluctant. We should no more have to censor our electronic conversations than whisper in a restaurant. I suspect that as my own generation and the one after it finally manage to boot the Boomers from their tenacious hold on the steering wheel of this civilization that they've piloted ineluctably and inexorably toward the shoals, all the while

whining about the lazy passengers, we will better understand this, and be better, and more understanding. And I hope that the kids today will refuse to heed the warnings and insist on making a world in which what is actually unacceptable is to make one's public life little more than series of polite and carefully maintained lies.

This is an eloquent statement of how many people, especially my age and younger, think about their online lives, and how they want others (including institutions as well as individuals) to approach what they share on social media. Certainly the moral case Bacharach makes is a potent one: An employer snooping on employees' Facebook pages, an ex-boyfriend forwarding intimate photos from past relationships to his friends, and yes, a government sifting your social media data are all engaged in something far more indecent than the online behavior they're exploiting. And the society he hopes for is one that *most* of today's young people will probably experience: A world where everyone treats Facebook the way they treat a happy hour with friends is a world where the individual costs of online sharing will be minimized (because everyone is doing it), and where most people's scantily-clad selfies and dumb tweets won't hurt their employment prospects, let alone attract any interest from the government.

But it's still the case that if your boss or your ex-boyfriend or your friendly neighborhood N.S.A. *did* have some reason to exploit your texts and tweets and emails and selfies, they would have means and opportunities that no previous era of social interaction has afforded. And that's what's missing from Bacharach's accounting: An acknowledgment that the use of social media is inherently different from offline forms of socializing, not in its content or intent, but in the kind of power it automatically cedes to other people and institutions, to use and exploit as they choose.

You can see this in the analogies he chooses, to restaurant dinners and happy hours. If you go to happy hour with your pals, those pals and maybe a nosy bartender are the only people who can exploit whatever happens there, and if somebody showed up with a flipcam and notebook you'd notice the weirdness of the situation quickly enough and alter your behavior accordingly. Likewise if you go on a date to a nice restaurant; you'd start censoring yourself pretty quickly if the couple at the next table started writing down everything you said.

If you hold forth with your pals on Gmail or Facebook, though, the flipcam-and-notebook combination is built into the platform you're using, and it belongs to your corporate hosts: You're giving them a semi-permanent record of what you've said and done, and however unethical it might be for them to exploit it, sell it, or allow the government to access it, the power to do so nonetheless exists. Likewise on a more personal level: What's shared with friends and lovers electronically gives them more power over you than a careless word or even an intimate letter would have done. In both cases, betrayal is possible, but in the online case, it can happen faster and more comprehensively than ever before.

And if there's one thing we know from human history, it's that powers granted rarely go unexploited. You may not be victimized personally; indeed, you probably won't be. But someone will, or many someones, in ways that wouldn't have been possible or even imaginable before the internet.

This victimization deserves to be condemned rather than just explained: A truly moral person, a truly moral corporation, and a truly moral government would not exploit the kind of information that people now share with one another on the internet. But it is not sufficient to simply say, with Bacharach and many others who have come of age with the internet, that privacy is "the decency ... to leave other's lives alone," and demand that the world and all its powers live up to that ideal. Privacy is also the wisdom to recognize that not all peers and powers are actually decent, and that one's exposure should perhaps be limited accordingly. And it's precisely because the ease and convenience of internet communication inclines us all (myself included) to forget or compromise this wisdom — or else pretend to we're abandoning it out of some higher commitment to honesty and openness — that I expect us to make our peace with the surveillance state, now and for many years to come.