

concerns about privacy often attach to Facebook because it is the largest holder of personally contributed but putatively private data in the world. In many cases, though, Facebook is just the technological avatar of the medium, rather than being a cause of any change in privacy itself.

There are two principal effects of the Internet on privacy. The first is to shrink personal expression to a dichotomy: public or private. Prior to the rise of digital social life, much of what we said and did was in a public environment — on the street, in a park, at a party — but was not actually public, in the sense of being widely broadcast or persistently available.

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Save Facebook From Itself



[William McGeveran](#), a professor at the University of Minnesota Law School specializing in Internet and privacy issues, [has written about legal responses](#) to social media marketing techniques.

Once again, there is a privacy kerfuffle at Facebook. And once again, as on multiple other occasions when Facebook unilaterally changed the way it handles our personal information, some observers shrug and conclude that technology simply “moves too fast” for the law to handle. I don’t know which is more exasperating, Facebook’s tone-deaf approach to privacy or the defeatist chatter that follows.

The F.T.C. has power to establish some broad guidelines for social media.

To be sure, a detailed statute that’s oriented to the specific architecture of Facebook — or any other social media platform — would be a bad idea.

In most other industrialized countries, specialized privacy regulators lay down general rules of the road for the collection and use of personal information online. I don’t think the United States could or should import those regimes in full. But we should learn from that model rather than throwing up our hands in frustration.

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If You’re Worried, Stay Offline



[Jim Harper](#) is the director of information policy studies at the Cato Institute, the webmaster of [WashingtonWatch.com](#) and the author of [“Identity Crisis: How Identification is Overused and Misunderstood.”](#)

If consumers have privacy worries, they can simply decline to use social networks like Facebook, and many do.

Facebook takes it in the wallet when a user signs off, or when a potential user fails to sign on.

Government officials lack the information needed to resolve the tensions among privacy, convenience, security and all the other interests people pursue online.

This gives it the incentives it needs to tune its privacy settings consistent with public demand. Politicians and regulators should keep out of the negotiations between Facebook and the public, and focus on getting their own house in order first.

In fact, it's ironic that Senator Schumer is taking aim at Facebook. He's the chief sponsor of a proposal to create a national I.D. system that would be required for all workers — and eventually, no doubt, for all Americans.

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A national I.D. goes far beyond embarrassing party photos online. It would place digital copies of basic documents like birth certificates, fingerprints or other biometrics in a national identity database available to government officials — and hackers. Under Schumer's plan, consumers would not be able to refuse to show the national I.D. card simply because of privacy worries.

It's not just hypocrisy that should warn government officials from tackling online privacy. They simply lack the information needed to resolve the tensions among privacy, publicity, convenience, security, entertainment, interaction, and all the other interests people pursue online.

Until there's an all-seeing Ministry of Culture and Values in the federal government, we need the push and pull of the market to figure out these problems.

Control of personal information starts with control of oneself. If you don't want people to know something, shut your mouth. And if you don't want information about you on social networks, not using social networks is a good start. (Yes, it is possible to live an entirely fulfilling life without them.) Privacy is a product of personal responsibility. It won't be a gift from government.

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Pete

NYC

May 26th, 2010

10:18 am

The suggestion that the government will enforce privacy rights of individuals at all, not to mention on the internet, is one of the funniest I've heard in a long time.

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San Francisco Peninsula

May 26th, 2010

10:18 am

It is not only their handling of privacy concerns, my experience in unsubscribing from Facebook was frustrating to say the least. I found it to be an unnecessarily difficult process. After going through it I'm still not sure whether I was successful. Requests via e-mail for confirmation remains unanswered.