

How Involved Should The Government Be In Protecting Online Privacy?

from the *hands-on, -hands-off* dept

The Economist is having one of its regular debates, this time on the question of **whether or not governments should do more to protect online privacy**. Speaking for the motion that government should do more is Marc Rotenberg of EPIC, while arguing that there are better ways to protect your privacy than expecting your government to help you is Jim Harper from the Cato Institute. Right now more people are siding with Rotenberg, but it seems like a classic "oh, somebody has to protect me!" sort of response. Harper's arguments make a lot more sense to me, with the key point being: *do you really trust the government to protect your privacy? The American government, like others around the world, is a voracious information collector. It facilitates and promotes private-sector tracking and surveillance. It skirts and sometimes violates laws intended to restrain its snooping, and it cannot be held accountable when it does.*

This does not seem like the kind of institution one would turn to for privacy protection. "Independent privacy agencies" and government bodies like the tiny, well-meaning American Federal Trade Commission do not tip the balance the other way.

Rotenberg responds that individuals really can't do much in response, and uses the example of Google Buzz's privacy screwup as an example. But, the response to that sort of proves Harper's point rather than Rotenberg's. Right after Google screwed up with the Buzz launch, in a manner that caused serious privacy concerns, the public and the press responded within hours, calling out Google for what it had done, and forcing Google to backtrack almost immediately and admit that it had screwed up. What more could the government have done? If it was solely up to the government, there would have been a months (years?) long investigation, and finally some sort of wrist-slap and a fine. The public response to Google's misstep and the concerns that raised among many people about their privacy in using Google seemed to function fine, and should (one hopes) cause Google to think a lot more carefully before making a similar mistake in the future.

Either way, as with all of the Economist's debates, there's a lot of interesting discussion going on, not just between the two main participants, but in the discussion section as well.

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