



Introduction

The **spiked/O2 online debate** 'Connected or protected - where do we stand?' is part of the second '**Mobile Futures**' series, exploring what roles mobile technologies will play in our changing lives. Launched in May 2007, the 'connected or protected' debate discussed the shifting boundaries of privacy and openness.

spiked (www.spiked-online.com) is a London-based online publication whose provocative edge attracts readers of all ages and nationalities. We also provide a forum for further discussion, through our pioneering online debates and live events at venues across London. *spiked*-debates aim to provoke critical thinking on the issues of the day, from global warming and the future of energy to copyright and child protection.

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'At O2 acting responsibly in all that we do - towards our employees, customers, suppliers and within those communities we serve - is critical. We measure what we do and strive for continuous improvement. Dialogue with our stakeholders - understanding your views - is key to our success... and sponsoring debates such as this one, helps us to form a view of the issues that surround the mobile phone: to identify what the facts and fears are, who is responsible and for what.'

Peter Erskine, CEO and Chairman, Telefonica O2 Europe

The experts

'Connected or protected - where do we stand?' was a timely debate, launched amidst growing concern that Britain is becoming a 'Big Brother society'. But it demonstrated that behind the headline warnings there are wider issues at stake. How does the development of new technologies that monitor our movements and habits affect our confidence in technological innovation? What are the consequences of conflating the private and public spheres? And how do the shifting boundaries of privacy and openness in today's technologically advanced society affect interpersonal relations?

We published four position papers in response to these questions to spark the online discussion which was open to contributions from members of the public.

Richard Thomas, the UK information commissioner, said that information technology raises questions about the nature of society, the role of the state, the activities of commercial bodies and the autonomy of citizens.

David Birch, director of Consult Hyperion, suggested that the idea of a 'Big Brother' society is a lazy stereotype and that 'in the future, it's Little Brother who will monitor our multiple identities'.

John Fitzpatrick, director of the Kent Law Clinic, believed what is really at stake in the growth of new technologies that monitor and gather private information is 'the way it encourages us to think less freely'. 'The more relaxed we become about the amount of detail about ourselves that we hand over to the authorities, the more relaxed we become about the boundary between the private and public sphere.'

Alex Taylor, of Microsoft Research, stated that in debates around technology, pitting privacy against openness sets up extremes that feel removed from real-world experience: "'Privacy" is a problematic phrase and should not be allowed to dictate over technological innovation.'

The respondents

The debate was open to the public for eight weeks and it provoked a range of thoughtful responses by individuals from countries including the UK, Canada and the Netherlands.

Some expressed distrust towards the government and others who administer new technologies, others disparaged that 'privacy has been lost' and that the collection of personal data by third parties is an undemocratic move.

Some respondents pointed out that because there is widespread distrust of the authorities, criticisms of the 'surveillance society' are rarely channelled positively. Instead it gives rise to more cynicism. Others were more hopeful that if we have the courage to challenge obvious threats to privacy, we can also make a positive case for personal liberties - and counteract such disillusionment and cynicism.

One respondent said that, while we often focus on the use of technology when considering the shifting bounds between privacy and openness, this is in fact primarily a political and cultural issue. Technological development, in itself, is not the problem.

• Extracts:

Technology may well throw up problems in terms of eroding privacy, but it can also provide solutions. What's important is whether we value privacy and believe it is worth protecting, and this is a political rather than a technological question.

Dolan Cummings

Privacy and the public interest are bound together by the capacity for error and the need for confidentiality. Restricting access to information and technology to the investigation of serious crime will ensure its utility in saving life, preventing and detecting serious crime.

Des Thomas

It does not seem to me that the level of privacy I currently enjoy is any less than it would have been in a small village, or a small upper class social circle, now or in the past. In fact, I suspect most of my friends and neighbours know less about me than their counterparts a century ago would have.

Paul Harrison

Privacy is about control - people should not have to work hard to control the information others have about them. We certainly need a constitution in the UK that makes it clear what information can be held, for how long, and what can be done with it.

Jeremy Wickins

The chances of you being killed by a terrorist in Britain are probably smaller than the chances of being struck twice by lightning so why give up privacy and the right not to be punished for something, unless it has been proved beyond reasonable doubt?

JC

I believe where the UK gets it wrong, (and I have worked on web projects here in very sensitive areas), is that we have an antiquated legal structure that both hides government and corporate information from the public, while subjecting the subjects (us) to huge amounts of intrusion and surveillance (which will only get worse). Because the UK fails to have a balance on this issue, I can see why people are immediately repelled by further database intrusion.

Bob Macdonald

Is the development of a surveillance society a reaction on the part of those in power who feel insecure and isolated and so resort to mass surveillance to convince themselves they are in control? Is it not a paradox of our time that when there is so little opposition to the state, there are so many encroachments on the individual's freedom?

Mark al Dulaimi

Is it acceptable that an insurance company should have to give its database to the DVLA when a product is bought? I think not. It's as if civil servants are using third parties to perform their market research in an unpaid capacity. Likewise, buy a new TV and the shop has to pass details of that purchase to the TV licensing authority. Whatever happened to commercial confidentiality - and who gave my consent to third parties to pass my details on?

Alan Stubbs, UK

The country needs a sea change - to use technology to the advantage of its citizens. It would seem, to most of us, that it has never been easier to 'govern for the people, by the people' - and yet the citizenry is being sidelined and the only form of government seems to be by legislation, when what is needed is education.

Marilyn Jill Saklatvala, UK

Technology not only provides the state and businesses with huge amounts of useful information, it also provides 'information hiding' capabilities, such that individuals will lose control over how their information is used and the decisions that are made, based on this information, behind the scenes. This is the greatest danger we face today.

Andy

In present circumstances, almost all information is gathered by states and corporations of one sort or another and the information, statistics, and images they gather are all part of their, and thus our, objective reality.

Malcolm Watts

Privacy in the airwaves and in emails is long gone... Surveillance just wafted over 'us' and around 'us'. And everybody pretended it would not affect us and that there is nothing we can do about it. Are we ever going to get to stop it?

David Chappell

As the UK Information Commissioner, Richard Thomas, points out in his contribution to the debate: 'Information technology has revolutionised people's lives, improved the quality and efficiency of the services provided to them and has become an essential feature of modern life in the developed world.'

The *spiked/o2* online debate has shown that technology itself is not an obstacle to safeguarding privacy or to enriching the way we relate to each other in the public sphere.

Warnings of the 'surveillance society' or fears of a 'Big Brother state' tend to focus on the negative uses of technology, yet the shifting boundaries of privacy and openness must be understood in political and cultural terms in order to be fully addressed. And technology may just as well be part of the solutions to any problems that arise as we negotiate these shifts.

'Connected or protected - where do we stand'

View the debate in full at <http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php?/debates/C108/>

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