

spiked-debate

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Mobile society Do mobile phones invade our privacy?



The *spiked/O2* online debate ‘Do mobile phones invade our privacy?’ was the first in a series of debates about the way that mobile phones shape our lives in the twenty-first century. Launched in June 2005, this six-week debate explored how mass usage of mobile phones is shifting the traditional boundaries between public and private life, and examined the new issues this raises for individuals’ privacy.

The debate culminated in a London seminar at IBM South Bank, bringing together contributors to the online debate and other interested parties to reflect upon the nature of privacy in our mobile society.

spiked 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.

O2 is a leading provider of mobile services in the UK, Germany and Ireland and owns **O2 Airwave** - an advanced, digital emergency communications service. The views expressed in this debate do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of **O2**.

‘We are sponsoring this online debate to stimulate views around the number of issues that surround privacy. Identify what the facts are, who is responsible and for what’.
Peter Erskine, CEO, O2 Plc

The experts

Our online debate asked readers to consider the question 'Camera phones, location-based services, data retention, wire tapping, spam - what do these things mean for us?', and invited responses by email or text message.

To kick off, we published three short position papers by experts on this issue. **Dr Nicola Green**, lecturer in the sociology of new media and new technologies at the University of Surrey, has researched notions of risk, trust, privacy and accountability in personal and location-based technologies. She discussed how the widespread use of mobile technologies contributes to the shifting notions of public and private space, and how this in turn has an impact upon the kind of communications people have with one another.

The boundaries between what is socially understood as 'public' and 'private' have in some ways become far less certain. This has important implications for how 'privacy,' as both an individual 'right' and as a social good, is enshrined in our collective public life.

Dr Nicola Green, University of Surrey

James Harkin, director of talks at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) and author of the 2003 Demos pamphlet *Mobilisation: The Growing Public Interest in Mobile Technology*, examined the development of mobile technology in the context of declining trust and increasing state surveillance.

As reserves of trust in contemporary societies continue to erode, mobile devices can easily become a scapegoat for our anxieties about other people ... The fear that each of us might end up under eternal surveillance by everyone else is a symptom of our hostility to the social dimensions of the mobile.

James Harkin, author of *Mobilisation*

Hamish MacLeod of the Mobile Broadband Group discussed the evolution of the technical capabilities of the networks and

handsets, and how this means that the mobile is used in ever more advanced ways.

Over the past 20 years, the mobile operators have had an excellent record for protecting the privacy of their customers ... But it is a dynamic environment and legislators, regulators and operators should always be on the lookout for potential problems, without losing sight of what a miraculous little device the mobile is.
Hamish MacLeod, Mobile Broadband Group

Three more position papers were fed into the debate as it continued. **Graham Barnfield**, lecturer in journalism and print media at the University of East London, examined the new phenomenon of happy slapping, whereby practical jokes and assaults are captured on video with a camera phone and circulated electronically. Drawing parallels with confessional TV programmes 'in which victims are encouraged to wear their hearts on their sleeves about their humiliation', Barnfield argued: 'It's simply the misfortune of mobile phones to have been caught up in the morbid lifestyle politics of the twenty-first century.'

Ross Anderson, chair of the Foundation for Information Policy Research and a researcher at the University of Cambridge Computer Laboratory, asked: 'How much is location privacy worth?' He reported on an experiment conducted by the FIPR to determine how much money must be offered to persuade someone to allow precise information about their location to be collected, concluding: 'The "privacy value" of the nation's location history can be estimated at several billion pounds per year'.

Dr Susanne Lace, senior policy officer at the UK's National Consumer Council, argued that while consumers clearly value their mobiles, they do care about privacy. Research at the NCC has found that 'over four out of five people surveyed ... said that people have less privacy now than they had ten years ago.'

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The respondents

The online debate ran for six weeks. Individuals from the UK, Europe, Canada and Australia contributed to a full and intelligent discussion of the many strands of the privacy debate. Policymakers, academics, managers, journalists and those working in the mobile communications sector contributed alongside members of the public.

Respondents debated, among other issues, how mobile communications affect our relationships with one another - whether that be strangers 'on the train!' or lovers receiving angry texts from cheated-on spouses. Does individuals' loud use of mobiles in public places reflect a greater openness, or a rise in bad manners?

[Mobile phones] reflect an increasing frivolity in social contact, as adults indulge in attempts to make meanings out of their lives and the people that they meet. As the general cultural level and political interest and awareness drops, callers engage in meaningless social interaction on their mobile phones. Gareth King, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain

The problem has nothing to do with the instrument, and much more with the manners of the ones who possess it. Kyvelie Papas, retired medical practitioner, UK

The issue of state surveillance was raised, with some asking whether mobile phones pose a distinctly new threat to privacy than other recent technological developments. Having identified this as a concern, what can be done about it?

The need to balance personal freedoms with public good is one of the key debates of our day. It's a debate that will intensify with the introduction of ID cards, a possible distraction from the power of ISPs and mobile operators. Phil Willis MP, chair, All Party Parliamentary Group on Mobile Communications

Politicians need to understand where the market is. The market needs to understand the irritation that constituents find. If we live in separate cells, we won't do this. Derek Wyatt MP, vice-chair, All Party Parliamentary Group on Mobile Communications

Mobile phone data trails do raise more serious issues than ATMs or loyalty cards, because they're general purpose communication devices ... That existing transaction systems have been designed ... with surveillance rather than privacy built in, is neither an excuse nor an argument for further privacy-hostile practices. Caspar Bowden, UK

Mobile phone data is just one part of an increasing trend in modern society for our governments and powerful institutions to hold more and more information about us. We need to be careful how we use our ever-increasing technical knowledge. Ben Hayles, O2, UK

And how much do consumers care about privacy anyway? Some argued that widespread use of mobile phones, and our everyday appreciation of this technology, indicates that privacy is perhaps less of an issue for the public than mobile operators and regulators might believe.

The emotional attachment that we have, with all that the mobile phone engenders, far outweighs concerns for invasion of privacy and intrusion in public space. Jane Vincent, research fellow, Digital World Research Centre, UK

The level of paranoia seems to be inversely proportional to real risk. A Raelian could scratch you on the tube, clone you, and keep you in slavery on a desert island for the rest of your life, and no one seems to care. But if there's a slight risk that someone might be able to tell that you're on the train or tap into your conversation, while you're yelling out 'I'M ON THE TRAIN - CAN YOU HEAR ME?', then suddenly there's a big privacy issue. Rhys Lewis, UK

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The London seminar

Over 50 people attended the 20 July seminar at IBM's London offices. The audience included representatives of the mobile phone and internet industries, policymakers, academics, and the general public. A panel of five speakers gave their brief views, followed by a discussion.

Richard Brown, Group Director of Public Affairs at O2, kicked off proceedings by explaining that O2 is keen to understand the social dimensions of the mobile phone, particularly given how personal these devices have become - 'almost a prosthetic limb', according to Brown.

Ross Anderson, chair of the Foundation for Information Policy Research, followed, arguing that many security issues have to do with incentives rather than with technology proper. According to Anderson, government and policymakers tend to be slow and wrongheaded when dealing with technology, and market solutions to privacy issues may well work better.

James Woudhuysen, professor of forecasting and innovation at De Montfort University, referred to the UK home secretary's assertion that, following the bombings in London, the authorities need to retain mobile phone data. Woudhuysen conceded that it would be impractical for the authorities to store and analyse such enormous quantities of data, but argued that retention by government was objectionable in principle in any case.

Hamish MacLeod of the Mobile Broadband Group began by asserting that since a mobile phone is an inanimate object, it cannot invade our privacy - only people can invade our privacy. He argued that abuses of privacy are the exception rather than the rule. He did, however, express concern over the malign uses to which people allegedly put their mobile phones, and he gave the example of happy slapping.

Susanne Lace, senior policy officer at the National Consumer Council, said that the

reaction to the London bombings illustrated how dependent upon mobile phones people have become, and that despite the negative aspects of mobiles, people wouldn't want to do without them.

However, according to Lace, the economy developing around mobile phone data lacks transparency, and companies need to work in partnership with one another and with consumers in order to retain consumers' trust.

In the wide-ranging discussion that followed, members of the panel and the audience discussed threats to privacy from government, commercial organisations, and the general public, and debated about how these differ from one another. Some participants in the discussion favoured regulation, while others questioned the assumption that the state acts benevolently in our interest. There was some discussion about whether the current enthusiasm for camera phones, particularly in the context of disasters such as the London bombings, reveals a certain voyeurism and ghoulishness.

Representatives of child protection organisations expressed their concern about the impact of mobile phone technology upon children, and the danger of children being 'the canary in the coalmine', if dangers are not addressed pre-emptively. **Susanne Lace** shared these concerns, but **James Woudhuysen** thought that the impression given - of ruthless companies preying upon children - was an unhelpful exaggeration.

Richard Brown concluded the discussion, picking up on an analogy that had been made earlier, between companies sending mobile phone spam and collecting data on the one hand, and leaflets arriving through one's letterbox on the other hand. Brown asked whether the postal service should be implicated in the delivery of such leaflets, and, in a similar vein, what responsibility mobile service providers should bear for what companies and individuals do with mobile phones. 'Where does the guardianship of privacy lie?', he asked.

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The last word - for now

Once the *spiked/O2* debate closed, we asked some of our key contributors for their final thoughts and reflections on the issue. We hope this will inspire an ongoing debate about privacy, public space and new technology.

The diversity of opinion revealed by the debate has shed light as much on the mobile phone as it does on the human and political state in which we currently find ourselves. Finding the balance between the need to protect the interests of the vulnerable, and the right of the individual to enhance their quality of life using new technology as they see fit will not be easy. One thing that becomes clearer is that responsibility cannot lie solely with governments or the industry, but must be taken up by individuals and customers. **Richard Brown, Group Director of Public Affairs, O2**

Privacy might be negotiated in everyday life, but everyday life, behaviour and interaction is framed and constrained by a number of institutional mechanisms from normative rules of behaviour to government policy and legislation. The key question for me is how policy and regulatory mechanisms can address *multiple* definitions of privacy, and simultaneously balance social benefit with individual protection. **Dr Nicola Green, University of Surrey**

The problem with the ongoing debate about mobiles and privacy, as I think the *spiked* debate makes clear, is less about the technology than about our shifting and nebulous ideas of what privacy is. Mobile phones do shrink our bubble of privacy from other people, but then so do cities, television and everything else about modern life. It is up to us to negotiate the transition. **James Harkin, author of *Mobilisation: The Growing Public Interest in Mobile Technology***

How can we best protect the privacy of consumers, and especially vulnerable consumers such as children, in the 3G age? Part of the response must be to strengthen and better police our data protection laws. The mobile phone industry must play its part, too. There is still much to be done - from technically building privacy protection into mobile applications, to automatically giving consumers greater controls on content when they buy mobile phones for children. **Susanne Lace, senior policy officer, National Consumer Council**

Mobile IT vendors and users need to form their own independent views of those who would invade our privacy - but also of those who believe that more state regulation will protect our privacy. We need a Mobile Regulation Watch to ensure that adult citizens can get on with their mobile lives without busybodies, of any description, interfering. **James Woudhuysen, professor of forecasting and innovation at De Montfort University**

Further information

The *spiked/O2* online debate 'Do mobile phones invade our privacy?' was the first in a series of three debates about the way that mobile phones shape our lives in the twenty-first century. The archived debate can be accessed in full at www.spiked-online.com/mobileprivacy

The next debate in the Mobile Society series, in Autumn 2005, will discuss the issue of mobile phones and health. In early 2006, we will launch a debate on mobile phones and child protection. For further information about *spiked* debates, contact *spiked's* commissioning editor, **Jennie Bristow**, on +44 (0)207 269 9222, or email Jennie.Bristow@spiked-online.com

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