

### Protecting privacy while broadcasting self

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The past decade has brought a quiet revolution in social interaction caused by new technology. Mobile phones, e-mail and Google have combined to make us - and information about us - more accessible. Even without technologies that pose a more direct threat to privacy, from closed-circuit television cameras to internet cookies, everyday life has become more transparent.

There are big personal and social benefits, but also side-effects: a loss of both privacy and the sense of privacy, and the risk of distraction that comes from being permanently available. The latest wave of internet technology is shaping up to take this much further.

Online social networking, for instance, is a habit that is spreading quickly. Two in five MySpace members are over the age of 35, and Facebook has nearly doubled in size since reaching beyond its original student audience.

Add in blogs and photo-sharing sites such as Flickr, and it seems that large numbers of people are discovering the joys of living their life in public, ready to sound off about what they are doing or thinking, or to share their friends with the social promiscuity of a teenager.

The technology tools of what has become known as Web 2.0 magnify the impact of all this "user-generated content".

#### Virtual existences

Consider Spock.com, a search engine currently in development. The service builds a profile by trawling for information about you on social networks as well as the web at

large, then lets other people add "tags", or labels, to your profile that can characterise you to anyone who is interested.

It won't stop there. The current buzz in tech circles is all about ways of broadcasting yourself over the internet in real time.

Users of Twitter, a service for transmitting short text messages, send frequent updates about what they are doing to groups of people.

Even if we don't all end as stars of our own personal Truman Shows, it won't be easy to opt out of the transparent digital community that is taking shape. Social pressure to conform is powerful, and setting limits is hard. Next time a vague acquaintance asks to be your friend on Facebook, can you really say no?

### **Social etiquette**

New forms of social etiquette are badly needed to govern the hyper-transparent world that is emerging. So are technologies to help people gain more control over their online existence. Before being encouraged to opt in wholeheartedly, people must believe that it is still both possible and acceptable to opt out.

Ultimately, individual users will have to come to their own personal accommodations with these new technologies.

Expectations about rights to privacy will evolve, even as the very definition of what it means to lead a private life will change. Life in a digital goldfish bowl will never be the same - but it need not all be for the worse.