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Social media security: Is our online privacy officially dead?

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Can You Take Back Your Online Privacy? 5:45



More consumers are taking steps to hide their digital footprint or stay clear of cookies. WSJ's Elizabeth Dwoskin reports on how people can avoid being tracked. Photo: Getty Images.

A FEW months ago on a Sunday morning, I was in my car at a set of traffic lights in Sydney's Potts Point, when Biggest Loser trainer Michelle Bridges and her on/off boyfriend, Steve Commando Willis, came out of a cafe with a group of friends. They were holding hands and looked like any normal couple going about their day.

What made the event remarkable was that not more than 10 metres away was a paparazzo with a digital SLR and a zoom lens the size of a large delicatessen salami, snapping off a succession of shots. Surely Bridges and Willis were entitled to have a Sunday breakfast with

friends without appearing in a tabloid magazine? It wasn't like they were getting up from a meal with the Beckhams. For a fleeting moment, I felt sorry for them.

But then it struck me: what could they reasonably expect? If your face is on TV, on airport bookshelves, in newspapers and magazines, on the back of buses spruiking a fitness institute – as Bridges' is – you can't presume you'll have anywhere to hide, especially when you date someone with their own media profile. The lovers would have to suck it up. Just like the rest of us.

In a share-happy world where our lives are increasingly played out on our smartphones or online, where to get anywhere socially or professionally we are encouraged to maintain multiple social-media accounts, where search engines can uncover practically anything about our personal histories so long as one looks deep enough, is there such a thing as privacy any more? More to the point, do we really even want it?



The Beckhams know what it's like to give up their privacy.

Mirror selfies uploaded to Instagram. Ill-considered tweets. Facebook apps that gain access to our "basic info" (name, profile picture, gender, user ID, list of friends, and any other information you make public).

Check-ins. Even our properties on Google Earth (yes, it's cannily used by thieves to scout entry and exit points for break-ins). We're in the midst of an exposure culture where much of what used to be in the private domain is laid bare – voluntarily or involuntarily – and, as a consequence, we've become more vulnerable than ever before.

The recent hacks on explicit photos of more than 100 individuals, including celebrities, were a salient reminder of just how exposed we really are to predations on our privacy. In my own case, a stranger began making derogatory statements about me on Twitter that had me fearing for my safety. They'd managed to obtain personal photos from one of my social-media accounts and defaced them. Later they took the abuse to other sites. The police did nothing, even when I managed to discover the culprit's name.

Written complaints to websites that were hosting the abuse fell on deaf ears. Only when I managed to get the personal email of a Google executive and threatened legal action was the offending material removed from search results. But soon the abuse popped up somewhere else, in a country outside Australia. Stopping this gutless creep was like chopping the head off a hydra: futile. In the end, I gave up and accepted I'd learned a tough lesson about my privacy.

Like Bridges and Willis, what could I expect? I'd made the decision with my work years ago to be publicly known. I'd put myself on social media. I'd effectively asked for trouble. Gaining likes or followers is welcome, but the price of any sort of publicity is you can't choose who takes an interest in you.

[MORE: How new technologies are making harrassment easier](#)



Janine Mackney, Aunty of Breeana Robinson who committed suicide, is taking a stance against textual harrassment and stalking.

Privacy is not a right. There isn't even a statutory definition of privacy. Last month, the National Security Legislation Amendment Bill was passed into law, strengthening existing

ASIO surveillance powers and flagging the possibility of mandatory data retention by telecommunications companies (including who their customers call, the location of all calls and the IP addresses assigned to customers).

But it doesn't take a spy agency for a complete stranger to build a profile of our private lives through simple search-engine results or our browsing history. Unlike in Europe, where the "right to be forgotten" was enshrined by the European Court of Justice (a provision that's seen 120,000 people formally request Google to remove links to pages mentioning them that are "inadequate, irrelevant, or no longer relevant"), in Australia we have next to no control over how our names appear in Google searches.

Meanwhile, those targeted ads you get on Facebook, Gmail and Twitter are popping up for a reason: your personal information is getting mined – or as Google describes it, "subject to automatic processing".

Forget having a spirited debate online with your friends about Afghanistan or the Middle East. Who knows what government agency is monitoring your conversations? Unless you're paying for encryption services such as IceBrowser, which routes your browsing activity through secure servers in countries with better privacy protection to ensure "corporations and intrusive governments cannot access your information", you'll possibly find out next time you pass through immigration at an overseas airport.



Actress Jennifer Lawrence was the victim of cyber hacking when nude photos from her phone were released.

The US National Security Agency's sprawling \$1.7 billion data centre in Utah has the capacity to store practically all our personal data (emails, text messages, browsing history, phone conversations, Skype calls) for perpetuity. In his TEDxBussels talk, Mikko Hyppönen, chief research officer at Finnish computer security firm F-Secure, called it "wholesale blanket surveillance of all of us".

And creepily, in a sign of what's to come in social networking, Google and Facebook have both invested heavily in biometric software. Biometrics (such as fingerprint, voice and face recognition) is expected to be a \$23.5 billion industry by 2020, growing at almost 20 per cent a year.

Facebook even introduced a listening-in function for its mobile app in the US, which records users' background noise (music or TV shows) via the microphones on their smartphones when they write a status update.

So, is it possible to completely get off the grid yet be socially relevant? Could privacy even become a new marker of success?

The answer is yes to both. While society continues linking marketability and power to nebulous 'influence indicators' such as Twitter and Instagram followers, celebrities including Julia Roberts, George Clooney, Johnny Depp and Angelina Jolie shun social media and haven't suffered for it one bit.



Just how safe is our personal information? Not very.

In fact, the more privacy they've managed to preserve, the more their status has been paradoxically enhanced. A bit of mystery goes a long way. Grammy Award-winning sound engineer David Thoener was once asked why his friend, multi-millionaire record producer Robert 'Mutt' Lange, was so reclusive. Lange, most famous for marrying, then divorcing, singer Shania Twain, isn't accessible on Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn. He doesn't have a website. He avoids being photographed and hardly any images of him exist. Very few people know how to contact him and he hasn't given an interview in years.

Thoener's response was telling: "He told me, 'Don't let anyone know what you think. If you don't do interviews, there's kind of a mystery about you. No one really knows what you think or why you think it.'"

The very problem in this day and age is that everyone knows what you think and why you think it, because so many of us are too afraid to stop sharing for fear we'll become irrelevant or simply be forgotten.

Privacy is possible. It's important and desirable. We should want it and fight for it. But it also requires us to begin switching off. And therein is the rub. In this overconnected planet we live on, how many of us are truly capable of doing just that?

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