

# Google Dashboard Changes Our Thinking About Privacy

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It's About Managing Our Public Profiles, Not Doggedly Keeping Everything Private

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The launch of Google Dashboard last week was subdued by Google standards. The Googlerazzi didn't cover it with its usual breathlessness and the blogosphere remained mostly mum about it. Perhaps one reason? Lurking behind the convenience of Google Dashboard, which lets you control all your Google information and services in one place, is the basic, uncomfortable question: "What might Google do with all the information it has about me?" The Dashboard, despite its obvious convenience, raises the sensitive "Google knows too much about us" argument, again.

This is why I suspect Google CEO Eric Schmidt, on a [recent interview](#) with Fox, discussed how Google was not crossing the "creepy" privacy line with its technologies and called Google Dashboard an empowering way for consumers to manage all their Google-related information.

His comments paid homage to our gauzy, romantic notion that privacy means we control our information, but he sidestepped defining what privacy should look like in the digital world. It's a question worthy of serious scrutiny because all the privacy rhetoric has, imprudently, raised consumers' privacy expectations to a level that may not be possible in today's internet world. While Sun Microsystems CEO Scott McNealy's famous quote, "You have zero privacy anyway. Get over it," is one approach, there are better options that can deliver a reasonable level of personal control of personal information.

In searching for this new definition, a quick retrospective on the history of privacy might inform our thinking. It quickly tells us that our modern notion of privacy was simply not operative for most of civilized history (if you didn't guess by now, my early training was in history).

In virtually every society since ancient times, one's identity was fully transparent because "people" were "public assets" of the prevailing rulers. There was a code for conduct and dress

that clearly identified everyone by class and depending on variations of this code, by village or clan or family. By default, you could say everyone was "public."

It wasn't until the middle of the 20th century, with the massive expansion of the middle class after World War II, that our modern sensibility of privacy emerged. The war "democratized" lots of things, like a new openness in dress, for instance, which allowed members of the middle class to pass themselves off as anyone. This budding notion of privacy was buoyed as the newly affluent middle class started living in bigger homes, which increased their appetite for privacy because it became a mark of success. Finally, during the paranoia of the Cold War, when the government had aggressive wiretapping programs and Sen. McCarthy has his blacklists, our current notion of privacy hardened into the near-sacred status enjoyed in our popular imagination.

Which brings us back to today. Our attachment to a definition of privacy that was born in a different time and place seems misaligned to the realities of today's internet world. The confusing, ambiguous and inconsistent set of privacy processes across the digital landscape is ample proof. For example, there are verification companies selling web-privacy trust seals to reassure site visitors that the site has a privacy policy. Unfortunately for the site visitor, this privacy "trust seal" makes no judgment about whether the site has a "good" privacy policy based on any objective standards.

And it gets even more confusing. Cookies are handy for end users but they are quite invasive, despite assurances from cookie crumb collectors that they only collect information, not individual user data. Would end users consider a re-marketing campaign as crossing the "privacy" line? The rise of social networks adds new issues: Should we assume the profiles we post in our social networks are private or public? Who should control where my profile is displayed?

That's why I think the introduction of Google Dashboard is an important step in the right direction. It will help us evolve our thinking about digital privacy to focus our attention on managing what is digitally public about us rather than on doggedly focusing solely on keeping information private. This announcement is another way to reorient us to accept that once we are a participant in the digital, social-networked world, we are in the public domain. Similar to listing our phone number in the phone book, we are "defaulted in" unless we opted out.

This move might be even be called bold (after all Google didn't need to launch Dashboard) and worthy of industry support. For those of us who operate social networks, communities or websites, let's continue this momentum by starting to apply a consistent "default public" set of business rules to reflect the new reality that social network participation is acceptance of a public digital life. This shift in the model that encourages users to manage their public digital information well is one that frees us to take full advantage of our newly expanding digital social lives.

In the history of privacy, everything old is new again -- only better.