

Are you concerned about the privacy of your internet activities?

A lot of people just shrug their shoulders at this question. They just don't care what information is being collected about them or their online habits and activities.



Others – including me – think that the “default position” ought to be that only the minimum information should be collected to permit an online function to happen and that no data should be kept unless it is required to protect one or both parties in a contract situation (such as a purchaser giving a full invoicing address).

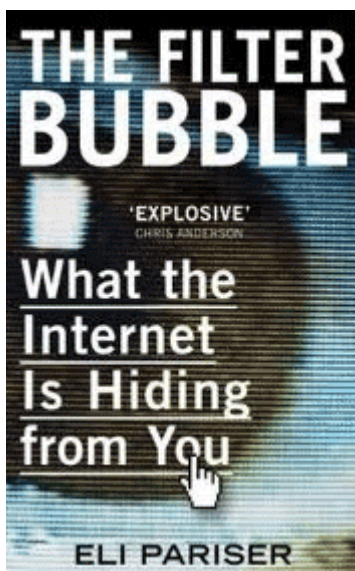
Someone recently told me that she thought it was “freaky” that Google ads are appearing in her email for products she had recently been looking at on seemingly unrelated websites. Along similar lines, I was recently training a silver surfer client in the use of Gmail and noticed a lot of ads for militaria. I asked him if he had recently had any contact with the army and he said that he had been involved in a veterans’ dinner.

Now, to some people this spying on our activity and fine-tuning on-line ads to capitalise on what they have learned about us is nothing more than a logical extension of how traditional advertising has always worked. After all, if you were selling a boat and wanted to advertise it, you would put the ad in a boating magazine because you’d know that the reader was interested in boats. Is there any difference between that and Google targetting ads about militaria to a Gmail user who has been discussing an army veterans’ dinner in his email correspondence?

If I ask people under 30 this kind of question, their eyes glaze over and a look comes over them that suggests that they’ve just realised they’re talking to a nutter and now they’re wondering if I’m dangerous as well. Ask the same thing to someone who’s old enough to remember the days before CCTV cameras (silver surfers in particular) and I’ll usually get a different response.

For what it's worth, my own opinion is that it is an outrageous invasion of privacy for Google to read people's email and use the knowledge gained to target ads to that person. OK, I do realise that it's a machine that's doing the reading and not humans. That doesn't change the principle. Apart from anything else, it's widely thought that Google never ever throw data away, so anything they've recorded about you could, in principle, be checked over by humans or machines at any time in the future. I also acknowledge that Gmail is "free" to use and that people are quite capable of choosing different methods of handling their email. However, that should only give them the right to read a Gmail user's outgoing - and not incoming - email. If I send an email to someone who uses Gmail what right do Google have to read that email? I haven't given them permission to do so: I don't use Gmail.

I've been reading a book called "[The Filter Bubble](#)" by Eli Pariser. [Click here for an interview with The Independent.](#)



Pariser discusses the fact that Google and other huge websites such as Amazon, Facebook et al, not only bombard you with ads that they have tailored to what they know about you, but that they are also tailoring content to show you what they think you will like. So, if you perform a Google search and I perform the same search we may be presented with different results depending on what Google knows about each of us. And I'm talking about the [Google organic results](#), here, not the Google advertising presented in [sponsored links](#). Facebook are likewise filtering which of your friends' updates are displayed to you depending on how much interest you have shown in that friend in the past. Pariser argues that these online organisations are creating a "filtered" view of the universe such that what you see on the internet is biased in favour of what you already know and like (ie you are in a "filter bubble"). Pariser maintains that, at the very least, this is presenting a distorted view of the world and most people are just not aware that such filtering is going on. I'm not sure about some of the implications that Pariser considers because I suspect that he over-estimates the importance of the internet in influencing our worldview. Nevertheless, I found this book informative, thought-provoking and worth reading (and thanks to Elaine for telling me about it).

If you belong to the part of the population that doesn't care about privacy and doesn't care where all this data gathering and filtering may be taking us then you won't read my blog next week as I'm going to list some of the steps you can take to try to protect your privacy. I feel like a cross between the boy with his finger in the dyke and King Canute, but I do feel happier taking at least a few steps in the right direction and maybe you will, too, if you find things like targeted advertising "freaky" and disturbing.

I am aware that I am open to charges of hypocrisy. I advertise my computer services using Google AdWords and www.google.co.uk is still my home page. I do also buy stuff on Amazon ([but not books](#)). That doesn't mean, though, that I have to approve of their definitions of

acceptable boundaries when it comes to information gathering, retention, and use. My stance is that taking small steps to protect my privacy is better than taking none at all.

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