

Control needed over digital view of lives: expert

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A man surfs the web at an Internet cafe. An MIT computer expert is calling for a "new deal" to allow individuals to control the "God's eye" view of their daily lives built up from the traces left behind when they phone or surf the Internet.

An MIT computer expert is calling for a "new deal" to allow individuals to control the "God's eye" view of their daily lives built up from the traces left behind when they phone or surf the Internet.

Alex Pentland, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, argued in a report released Thursday that the growing amount of "digital breadcrumbs" were of enormous social and scientific value.

But their owners were increasingly exposed to misuse and violation of [privacy](#) as "reality mining" allows companies and governments to piece together ever more extensive data on behaviour patterns and personal movements.

Pentland, a specialist on human-centred technology, said companies would have a key role in a "new deal" to ensure that people retained ownership of data they unwittingly left behind and consented to its use.

Such a deal would also allow tracking data to be harnessed for "the Common Good" such as disease tracking, health care, safety or environmental protection, but only anonymously, he argued.

"Revolutionary new measurement tools provided by mobile telephones and other digital infrastructure are providing us with a God's eye view of ourselves," Pentland said in the report on global information technology by the World Economic Forum.

"At the same time, these new tools have the potential to make George Orwell's vision of an all-controlling state into reality."

"What we do with this new power may turn out to be either our salvation or our destruction," he added.

The traces currently include data on [Internet](#) viewing or shopping habits, mobile phone communications and movements, and automotive GPS navigation systems.

But with more sensors appearing on a variety of electronic devices and networks expanding, "reality mining" would build up even more precise models of human behaviour "with a breadth and depth that was previously inconceivable," Pentland cautioned.

Pentland's call echoes concern expressed earlier this month by Tim Berners-Lee, one of the founders of the World Wide Web, about the emergence of user profiling on the Internet and "snooping."

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