

Privacy law expert warns of the perils of social reading

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Richards

The Internet and social media have opened up new vistas for people to share preferences in films, books and music. Services such as Spotify and the Washington Post Social Reader already integrate reading and listening into social networks, providing what Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg calls “frictionless sharing.”

“But there’s a problem. A world of automatic, always-on disclosure should give us pause,” says Neil M. Richards, JD, [privacy](#) law expert and professor of law at Washington University in St. Louis.

“‘Frictionless sharing’ isn’t really frictionless – it forces on us the new frictions of worrying who knows what we’re reading and what our privacy settings are wherever and however we [read](#) electronically. It’s also not really sharing – real sharing is conscious sharing, a

recommendation to read or not to read something rather than a data exhaust pipe of mental activity.

“Rather than ‘over-sharing,’ we should share better, which means consciously, and we should expand the limited legal protections for intellectual privacy rather than dismantling them.”

Richards says that what’s at stake is “intellectual privacy,” his term for the idea that records of our reading and movie watching deserve special protection compared to other kinds of personal information.

“The films we watch, the books we read, and the websites we visit are essential to the ways we try to understand the world we live in,” he says.”

“Intellectual privacy protects our ability to think for ourselves, without worrying that other people might judge us based on what we read. It allows us to explore ideas that other people might not approve of, and to figure out our politics, sexuality and personal values, among other things.

“Sharing and commenting on books, [films](#) and ideas is the essence of free speech.”

Richards notes that the work of the American Libraries Association and its Office of Intellectual Freedom (OIF) offers an attractive solution to the problem of reader records.

“The OIF has argued passionately and correctly for the importance of solitary reading as well as the ethical need for those who enable reading – librarians, but also Internet companies – to protect the privacy and confidentiality of reading records,” he says.

“The norms of librarians suggest one successful and proven solution — professionals and companies holding reader records must only disclose

them with the express conscious consent of the reader.

“The stakes in this debate are immense. Choices we make now about the boundaries between our individual and social selves, between consumers and companies, between citizens and the state, will have massive consequences for the societies our children and grandchildren inherit.”

More information: Read more of Richards comments on intellectual privacy on the OIF Blog- www.oif.ala.org/oif/?p=3720

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

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