

Your emails are all scanned—and that's what you agreed to

August 23 2013, by David Tuffley



Legally, you've agreed to have your emails scanned – but what about morally?
Credit: enggul

According to Nobel Laureate Gabriel García Márquez, "all human beings have three lives: public, private, and secret". It is in our nature to want privacy, yet in the internet age, it has never been easier to access the details of our private lives.

In May 2013, whistleblower Edward Snowden lifted the lid on just how far [intelligence agencies](#) are able to reach into our online lives. The news came as a shock to many, though agencies such as the US National Security Agency (NSA) have had this capability for years.

A [recent article](#) in *The Guardian* highlights the dynamic tension in this debate. Consumer Watchdog, a US-based advocacy group, has taken umbrage with Google's admission that the content of Gmail messages are automatically scanned. Suits and counter-suits are flying back and forth.

Email providers have given themselves the legal right to scan people's email by including it in their Terms of Service to which people must explicitly agree before they can use the service.

For example, Gmail's [privacy policy](#) states:

We use the information we collect from all of our services to provide, maintain, protect and improve them, to develop new ones, and to protect Google and our users. We also use this information to offer you tailored content – like giving you more relevant search results and ads.

None of us like to think it's the case but our email has always been scanned – not only by Google but almost every other email provider, by employers concerned about proprietary leaks, and by intelligence agencies too.

Email providers have no voyeuristic interest in the day-to-day lives of their users. They are using automatic content scanners to weed out spam and to give them the means to place targeted advertisements on your screen, the price you pay for this otherwise free service.



Credit: estherase

Intelligence agencies are not interested in the the lives of [ordinary people](#) either. They sift through the torrent of data looking for covert criminal and terrorist activity, information that might prevent the flight you are travelling on from blowing up mid-air, or to apprehend organised criminals.

Great expectations

The central issue in all this is that people have an expectation of [privacy](#)

online where that privacy has never actually existed. The internet is a public place and we should adjust our expectations accordingly. If we do not say anything on the internet that we would not say standing on a soapbox at Speakers' Corner, we have nothing to worry about.

The question is, do people have a moral right to privacy? Arguably they do, but it is a case of the collective good outweighing people's individual rights, at least in terms of preventing terrorist attacks and curbing organised crime.

So there is a line that must be drawn, but no clear place to draw it. Case by case, we need to weigh up where the interests of the greater good ends and the individual's right to privacy begins.

A disturbing trend for some is the recent move by Google to cross-reference and aggregate data from across its range of services. Google Now – a mobile app that acts as an intelligent personal assistant – combines information from your email and calendar, the directions you get from Google Maps, and so on.

Designed to work with or without Google Glass, it uses a natural language user interface to answer questions, make recommendations, and perform actions on your behalf.

For some, this is one step closer to Nirvana. To others it is a sinister plot to strip us of what little privacy remains.

A scan-free email service?

So what are your alternatives if you want email privacy? The news is not encouraging. All of the major providers scan email contents for commercial purposes and may be compelled to pass on information to the government. There are anonymous email providers, but it is doubtful

whether any of them can guarantee complete protection against a determined intelligence agency.

These providers include [Tor Mail](#), [FastMail](#), [Send Anonymous Email](#), [Anonymouse](#), [Mailinator](#), [Anonymous Speech](#), [Hushmail](#), [Send Email](#), [Hide My Ass!](#), and [Guerrilla Mail](#). This list is indicative, not exhaustive and makes no recommendations.

As Márquez observes, humans have an implicit need for privacy. He goes so far as to say that each of us has a secret life, one that we reveal to no-one and which is the expression of our essential self – perhaps our best self.

It is vital to realise that privacy on the internet is an illusion. All we have is the relative privacy of knowing that our words are mixed in with a trillion other words. Unless we are up to no good, no-one will be paying any attention to them.

The worst that will happen is that you might see an ad for a discounted Cruise Holiday next to the [email](#) you wrote about how stressed you are at work.

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