

# Moving in cycles: The surprisingly resilient nature of privacy online

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For over a decade, numerous voices have claimed that online privacy is dead, due to users disclosing their personal details in social media and fuelling government mass surveillance. Just released, a new book entitled *Against the Hypothesis of the End of Privacy*, suggests that privacy has not declined, but has become cyclical.

## Beyond the discourse of the 'end of privacy'

A team of researchers has just published a book demonstrating that online [privacy](#) is still alive and thriving. *Against the Hypothesis of the End of Privacy: An Agent-Based Modelling Approach to Social Media* (published by Springer in the series SpringerBriefs in Digital Spaces), challenges the received wisdom that massive content-sharing on [social media](#) inevitably tolls the doom of privacy as we know it. This has long been one of the prevailing discourses in internet studies, and particularly younger generations have often been described as prone to live open digital lives. "We use new socio-computational methods to assess these claims", says Antonio A. Casilli from Telecom ParisTech, one of the authors. "Our findings radically change the understanding of the way people behave in the social web".

"We were intrigued when we discovered that the hypothesized 'end of privacy' is only one of the possible outcomes of the interactions of social media users - and not necessarily the most likely to occur," adds Paola Tubaro from the University of Greenwich, who led the research. "Over

time, average privacy first slightly decreases, only to increase steeply afterwards. Despite an initial surrendering of privacy, a counter-tendency kicks off: social media users start protecting themselves when they feel that their private sphere is threatened."

After analyzing historical series of conflicts around privacy, the researchers in collaboration with Yasaman Sarabi (U. of Greenwich) developed an agent-based modelling tool to study the social networks of users of popular online platforms. The software, released under GNU General Public Licence, can be freely downloaded (see link below). It is in this way that the team evidenced that online sharing is more strategic and controlled than might be expected. Careless self-disclosure is far from being a trend. At aggregate level, social media users are negotiating their privacy among them and with platform owners. They are still keen on protecting their personal information: "The recent scandal around NSA [mass surveillance](#) is the latest episode of public outcry, in a long list of reactions to erosions of users' control over their data", says Tubaro.

## **Why public-by-default ignites privacy cycles**

The surprising results presented in the book are at odds with other views of the [social web](#). Jeff Jarvis famously advocated the idea of the advent of "publicness" as the new standard for today's connected lives, and it is a common idea in the field of internet studies that users display paradoxical attitudes towards privacy. Especially with younger generations, it seems rather easy for web companies to track online behaviours and to mine personal data.

According to Casilli: "The actual paradox, our study shows, is that the very intervention of social networking service providers unchains users' reactions. Every 6 to 8 months, services like Facebook create some privacy incidents by publishing new information on their users. And

when this happens, privacy starts moving in cycles: providers try to forcefully drop it to nil, users set it back up to maximum protection, and so on in potentially endless fluctuation... Web companies' interventions are not only short-lived, they eventually backfire."

## **A socio-computational pamphlet for policy-makers**

The book is a short essay in three parts: the theoretical framework of the study, the experiments and results, and the policy recommendations.

"We wanted to make a concise, provocative text", explains Casilli. "It's a scientifically informed pamphlet, intended to influence policy-makers and public debate. Think Jonathan Swift—with computational tools."

If the research indicates that a networked society is able to develop antidotes to attempts to forcefully impose total disclosure, warn the authors, this conclusion should not be taken as a defence of political laissez-faire. "Privacy authorities and users' associations", insists Tubaro, "should remain vigilant. Regulators should put in place appropriate provisions to protect [users'](#) rights to control their [personal information](#), and regulate internet companies at supra-national and inter-governmental levels."

According to the authors, this book is a first step towards a better understanding of these effects, which may help policy-makers plan more successful strategies in the future.

**More information:** Paola Tubaro, Antonio A. Casilli & Yasaman Sarabi

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