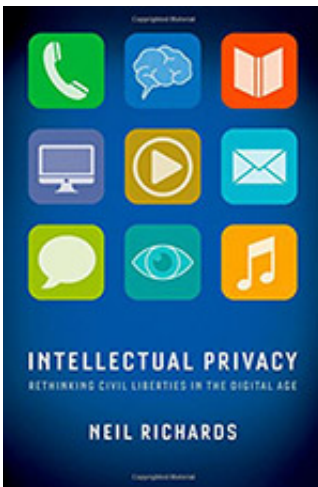


Intellectual privacy vital to life in the digital age

February 3 2015, by Neil Schoenherr



In our increasingly digital world, the balance between privacy and free speech is tenuous, at best.

But we often overlook the important ways in which privacy is necessary to protect our cherished [civil liberties](#) of [freedom of speech](#), thought and belief.

That's why [free speech](#) should almost always win out over privacy, says Neil M. Richards, JD, a privacy law expert at Washington University in St. Louis and author of the new book, "[Intellectual Privacy: Rethinking](#)

[Civil Liberties in the Digital Age](#)," published Feb. 2 by Oxford University Press.

"I want people to realize that in building our digital world, we have choices," said Richards, professor of law at the School of Law, noting the importance of free speech to democratic societies.

While new technologies that allow us to learn and communicate in powerful ways continue to be developed, we aren't paying as much attention to the important human values we fought hard to build into our pre-digital technologies, Richards said.

"Intellectual privacy is the much-needed protection for learning, reading and communicating that helps us make up our minds about the world on our own terms," he said. "Without intellectual privacy, when people are watching us when we read and communicate, our thoughts and beliefs get driven to the boring, the bland and the mainstream.

"As a society, we say frequently that we care about individuality, diversity, eccentricity and the vibrant weirdness that freedom makes possible. If we don't have intellectual privacy, all of these important values that make life worth living are threatened."

In the book, Richards shows how most of the laws we enact to protect [online privacy](#) pose no serious burden to public debate, and how protecting the privacy of our data is not censorship.

While we should choose to protect free speech, Richards argues, protection for intellectual privacy – the privacy we need when we're thinking, reading and communicating, is essential if we want to come up with something new to say.

"The digitization of society isn't some external force, like the weather or

the tides," he said. "As a society, we're faced with a choice. We could choose the world that corporate and government self-interest might want – a world of surveillance, segmentation and boring, passive consumers. Or we could choose a different world, one of vibrant free debate, and in which everything we read, think or say isn't monitored and tracked by advertisers or spies."

Richards argues that while we have many choices, those choices will be made with human values in mind.

"I'm hopeful as our understanding of the world we're building matures, we'll make choices that protect the human values of democracy, free speech, free thought and intellectual privacy that took so long and so much hardship to build in our pre-digital society," he said.

"I'm hopeful we will do it, but we need to make technology serve human value, instead of making humans serve technological efficiency."

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

Citation: Intellectual privacy vital to life in the digital age (2015, February 3) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-02-intellectual-privacy-vital-life-digital.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.