

Why you might want to think twice about surrendering online privacy for the sake of convenience

January 11 2017, by Carissa Véliz



Credit: Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels

It is inconvenient to guard one's privacy, and the better one protects it, the more inconvenience one must endure. Enjoying privacy, at a

minimum, demands installing software to block tracking online, using long and different passwords for online services, remembering to turn off the WiFi and Bluetooth signals on your mobile phone when leaving the house, using cash, and so on.

The more privacy conscious have to go through the trouble of using encryption for all their messages, [covering the camera on their laptop](#) with a sticker, suffering the slowness and limitations of using Tor (a software that enables anonymity online), and may even be willing to forgo the many advantages of having a [mobile phone](#) altogether.

Companies and institutions should not make it this hard for people to enjoy privacy – we shouldn't have to go through all this trouble to make good on a right. However, we live in a non-ideal world, where it is more and more a fact of the matter that governments and businesses exploit people's personal information for economic and political reasons.

So, individuals living in the real world are faced with the dilemma of either complying with the default option and surrendering their privacy, or trying to resist exposure through paying a high price in inconvenience. It makes sense to ask whether privacy is worth all the trouble.

Imagine going into a shop, picking out whatever you fancy, putting it in your bag, and simply walking out. No cash, no credit cards, no queues. Cameras using facial recognition have identified you and you will be billed automatically. You rarely go into shops, anyway. Only when you feel like going for a stroll, or when you wish to explore new products. Most of the time, everything in your house gets restocked automatically through sensors connected to the Internet of Things. That future may not be far away. Amazon just opened [a checkout-free shop](#) in Seattle, and may soon [open more stores in the UK](#).

The inconvenience of convenience

The bright side of [convenience](#) is an attractive one: it promises us an easier life. Convenience, like pleasure, is an important component of a good life. If we didn't choose convenience every now and again our lives would be hopelessly uncomfortable and inefficient.

But let's not forget that convenience can also lead to undesirable paths – [it can even kill](#). Convenience often leads us to to have [sedentary lifestyles](#), support [businesses that harm society](#), have unsatisfactory daily routines, to be uneducated, and [politically apathetic](#).

It is inconvenient to only buy from socially responsible businesses, to exercise, to find new things to do, to keep well informed, to vote and protest when governments commit injustices. A good life demands a reasonable degree of struggle – the right balance between the ease of convenience and the benefits of meaningful efforts. Like pleasure, convenience has to be weighed against the price we are paying for it, and the short- and long-term consequences that might ensue.

Weighing up the losses

Unfortunately, it is not easy to assess the weight of privacy losses. Typically, in the online world, no small privacy loss will create a catastrophe. One business tracking one click of yours is not a big deal. But privacy losses accumulate, and the entirety of what you have revealed online through browsing, clicking, buying and liking, can paint a frighteningly [detailed portrait of you](#).

Privacy losses are like ecologic damages or health deterioration: no one act of littering, no one puff of a cigarette will bring about disaster, but the sum of them through time might.

What possible damage could come from giving up privacy online, you

may wonder. If you ask for a job, it is likely that the company considering hiring you will buy a file on you from data brokers. Your file may contain information on browsing habits, credit history, health records, and more. The company may not hire you because of something you posted on social media, or because of some other kind of "stain" on your record, and you will never know why it was, nor will you ever be able to contest that decision.

Similarly, a bank may not grant you a loan from information they glean from you on the internet. The information on which they make their decision may be inaccurate, but again, you will never know. Hackers could turn on your camera and blackmail you with sensitive footage. Criminals may commit identity theft.

According to the Federal Trade Commission, [identity theft](#) complaints in the US [increased by 47% between 2014 and 2015](#). Trolls may harass you online and offline. Insurance companies may charge you according to information about your habits. Products such as flights may become more expensive for you depending on how much you seem to want them. And the list goes on.

It is paramount that we demand businesses and government institutions enable us to enjoy privacy online more easily. In the meantime, however, you might want to think twice about surrendering your [privacy](#) for the sake of convenience.

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