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Privacy ultimately your responsibility

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On the Cutting Edge / Brian Bowman

WHO do you think is the biggest threat to your privacy? If you think the answer is the government, certain businesses or your employer, think again. The biggest threat to your privacy is you.

In an era when many Canadians feel that Big Brother is watching their every move, too many overlook the fact that the most important custodian of their personal information is themselves. After all, we are typically the ones that willingly provide our data to others.

In the aftermath of 9-11 and with the introduction of new private-sector privacy laws in Canada, privacy issues have catapulted to the top of social, political and business discourse.

Yet, even in this era of heightened privacy sensitivities, many Canadians seem all too willing to provide their personal information to strangers without even the most basic due diligence on their part. Ask yourself if you have ever provided detailed personal information to a retailer without really knowing how they are going to use or safeguard your data.

A great number of Canadians are concerned about government anti-terrorism surveillance, covert monitoring by their employers and the manner in which some businesses safeguard their personal information. Recall the massive Winners/HomeSense privacy breach.

What I find most interesting, however, is how some Canadians raise privacy alarms and then turn around and disclose personal information to strangers without hesitation.

As a society we cry for privacy protection while embracing technologies that can invade our privacy such as camera phones, social networking websites like Facebook, PDAs and global positioning systems.

To illustrate the point, one only has to look to the recent survey conducted by Sophos. Sophos fabricated a Facebook profile for a small green plastic frog named Freddi Staur and then sent out 200 friend requests to individuals chosen at random. A shocking 41 per cent of Facebook users were willing to divulge to "Freddi" their personal information, such as their e-mail address, date of birth and phone number.

Can we have it both ways? Is it possible to have our privacy protected while embracing modern technologies? In most cases, I think the answer is yes.

A few years ago, many commentators were lamenting the advent of Internet blogs, claiming that essentially privacy was dead. Yet just the other day the federal Privacy Commissioner of Canada launched her own Internet blog, which I expect will serve to disseminate valuable information to Canadians about privacy issues.

Privacy is not dead. It is, however, being challenged in ways we may never have imagined just a few years ago. Meeting this challenge will require all of us to take greater responsibility for protecting our own privacy.

We should be asking more privacy-related questions to businesses that want our personal information. Credible organizations will be ready to respond to questions because they will be working hard to comply with privacy legislation.

We should be demanding that governments do more to protect privacy. Manitoba's government, for example, promised to create a privacy commissioner in 1999.

After eight years, Manitobans still do not have a privacy commissioner. Have you contacted your MLA to demand action?

Most importantly, we should think twice before disclosing personal information to strangers. Facebook is a great service, but too many Facebook users seem willing to share detailed data about themselves to strangers without thinking twice.

The biggest threat to your privacy is you. I hope you take care.

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