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Revealing Privacy
Debating the Understandings of Privacy
Editor’s Introduction

The papers in this book are versions of a selected number of presentations given at the international symposium ‘Revealing Privacy: Debating Understandings of Privacy’, that was held at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies in May 2011. The purpose of this symposium was to bring together a diverse group of scholars from the fields of humanities and social sciences to contribute towards and discuss how privacy is understood today.

Privacy is not a new issue but it remains an enduringly problematic one. In the contemporary world the new means of communication, and the new democratisation of information flows through blogging, twitter, and social networks, have added a distinctive and radical shift to concerns with the boundaries of privacy and its protection. The legal system has historically played a central role in the definition of privacy and its policing. Internationally we can see that different national legal frameworks for the protection of privacy have implications for its maintenance as differing state systems, and their attendant political discourses, frame the understanding and protection of the right to privacy. States and commercial enterprises, for example, increasingly have the capacity and intent to monitor a wide range of our behaviours, from health and mobility, to purchasing habits and internet behaviour. At the same time urban planning is prepared to shape our physical environment in terms of seeking to exclude some citizens and facilitate the participation of others in the interests of a mix of commercial and security rationales: increasingly public space is being privatised. At the same time philosophy and social psychology have engaged in an interrogation of the foundational bases of privacy and its relationship to the construction of the self. Given the dramatic malleability of the experience and the expression of privacy within a specific socio-historical context, these issues remain central to our capacity to enter into any practical concern with the current experience of negotiating privacy in a personal and political space. In the contemporary world, for example, the securitisation of banal daily life is but one of the forces transforming the social, political and legal context within which privacy is negotiated.

The multidimensional character of privacy is reflected in the multiplicity of perspectives from which the contributions in this book approach the topic of privacy. They are, however, united by an interest in promoting further debate. Whether read all together or separately according to the personal interests of the reader, every contribution touches upon the main questions raised by the privacy issue. What is privacy? Is it a right? A privilege? A claim? A condition? A fundamental part of the self? What strategies are used to achieve or to protect
the individual’s privacy? How are our conceptions of privacy evolved throughout times and cultures?

In ‘The private in the public archive’, Maryanne Dever discusses the question of how to approach private letters that end up being displayed in the public archive. A private letter is by definition a document containing information that the sender wants to share only with the receiver because of the intimate character of the contents. A personal communication thus reinforces the ties of intimacy between two individuals, and to breach upon it by rendering the letter accessible to others is deemed a violation of privacy. Paradoxically when intimate papers become available for public scrutiny, by virtue of their preservation within an archive, researchers appear to be entitled to read other people’s letters and to speculate about their private lives. Whilst the number of specific restrictions dictated by the public archive seems to aim at protecting an individual’s rights to privacy, there is doubt whether these archival practices are employed out of concern for the others’ privacy. Dever correctly argues that the use of restrictions for the protection of an individual’s privacy is rather a means by which to enhance the value of the private document. In this sense, the private contents of a personal letter is the creation of the reader’s expectations about the potentially intimate contents of the document.

The intimate character of the personal letters is not questioned when they have been written in earlier times. Rather, they are used as a valuable source of information about general social practices and specific personal thoughts of the writer in a given society. In her paper ‘Secrets among spouses: marital privacy in Cicero’s letters’, Linda McGuire analyses the nature of the private relationship between a husband and a wife in Roman society through a selected number of private letters that the senator Cicero wrote to or about his wife Terentia in the 1st century B.C. While ancient and modern scholarship tends to depict the Roman woman as a powerless individual who was confined within the private space of the house and denied access to public spaces and matters, McGuire’s contribution shows that Terentia was a rich and independent woman of the Roman elite and was very capable of acting as intermediary in ‘male’ financial matters during her husband’s exile. In spite of Terentia’s financial and moral support, Cicero divorced his wife after thirty years of marriage. This is again a private matter between two spouses but it becomes a topic of public scrutiny and speculation about the reasons of so personal a decision. As McGuire superbly shows throughout her paper, it is difficult to disclose the most private thoughts of a man who employs a number of methods (e.g. nicknames and no discussion of very personal matters) in order to limit potentially dangerous information that may affect his uncertain position as an exile. It is even more difficult to penetrate into the private world of a woman who has no
voice in her husband’s letters. As in most marriages ending with divorce, there was probably a problem of communication between Cicero and Terentia, which could be related to two main factors: the long distance, which physically separated the husband from his wife, and the lack of a house as a materially defined space where the two spouses could share intimacy and protect personal information from public scrutiny and interference. Also, because of the loss of his house as the physical space traditionally associated with the woman in her role as a wife and a mother, Cicero would have found it more difficult to locate his wife Terentia.

The topic of domestic privacy in the Roman house is discussed in my contribution ‘Visualising ancient privacy in the Roman house’. Any discussion on the meaning and experience of domestic privacy in ancient times is fraught with difficulties. Few of the Latin writers speak of themselves or of their characters as seeking or enjoying privacy. Yet some of their works reveal dramatic tensions between the need for retreat and community, for concealment and visibility, for intimacy and self-presentation: the fundamental conflict between privacy and publicity. This tension also appears in the spatial arrangement of the Roman house: spaces designed for the reception of the house-owner’s guests (public areas) are placed side by side with spaces for the personal use of the family (private rooms). The paper shows how in their everyday practices the Romans negotiated the harms and expectations of informational and spatial privacy through a selection of specific moments for exposure or concealment.

The social analysis of ancient communities is certainly fraught with many difficulties not only because of the distance in time but also for the lack of ample documentation about how people experienced their houses or what their innermost feelings and thoughts were. By contrast, anthropological fieldwork in existent communities gives the great advantage of obtaining first-hand material through observation, however difficult it may be for the anthropologist to interact with people from a different cultural background. The results of participant observation thus open up new paths of investigation and allow a deeper understanding of universal phenomena such as privacy. This is evident in Elena Liarskaia and Stephan Dudeck’s paper on ‘Multiple privacies – Nesting spheres of intimacy in Western Siberian indigenous lifestyles’. The two scholars argue that, in spite of the lack of the term ‘privacy’ in the language of two indigenous communities in Western Siberia, their social practices show an idea of what in the Western culture we call privacy and intimacy. This appears in the way the members of these communities set boundaries around specific knowledge of the self in order to protect their integrity and to show their respect of pre-existing norms of behaviour in the community to which they belong. The
disclosure of inappropriate information about the individual or the display of practices that should be kept hidden, such as sexual intercourse or the woman’s unveiling of her head, cause shame and embarrassment. The result is not the individual’s concealment of information or secrecy but the public avoidance of knowledge that can harm the reputation of that individual. The practices of these communities thus show different sensibilities toward the private sphere of their members.

There is no doubt that values of, and approaches to, privacy are affected by the individual’s relation with the community and the physical space where both individual and community are located, may it be a natural setting or a small village or a larger city. The dimension of privacy within the specific urban experience is discussed in two contributions: ‘Sociological and philosophical insight into privacy in postmodern cities’ by Karol Kurnicki and Katarzyna Salamon; ‘Privacy and depth configurations. Proximity, permeability and territorial boundaries in urban projects’ by Kris Scheerlinck.

Kurnicki and Salamon argue that the personal and social experience of the inhabitant of the urban space in post-modern times is affected by the lack of a clear distinction between the public and the private. Since the 5th century BC Western philosophical theories about the relation of the individual with the community have been based on the dual role of the person as private in relation to herself and public in relation to the society. In the post-modern city, by contrast, privacy is mainly associated with the idea of personal security achieved through the social control of the space. The result is the creation of a gated community as a defensive measure against the threats of violation of the community outside. However, the control of access into this closed space limits the possibility of encounters with non-residents and therefore occasions of communal life. Kurnicki and Snell suggest that a renewed demarcation between public and private would enhance the social and personal experience of the person.

By contrast, Kris Sheerlinck states that the relation between public and private spaces in the urban projects is mediated by the collective spaces. The variety of the forms and characters of the collective spaces, may they be located in the restricted area of a domestic building or in the wider context of an urban area, depends on the multiplicity of depth configurations. The concept of depth configuration refers to the arrangement of a sequence of movements between public and private spaces. Depending on the number of sequences and the ways buildings or areas are accessed, privacy is achieved when the individual has the possibility of deciding where and when she does not want to share space.

Concerns with the boundaries of privacy and its protection have been dramatically increased with the development of media technologies, such as
photography and social networks. In her contribution ‘Privacy, photography, and the art defense’, Sarah Parson discusses privacy concerns raised by specific practices of photography for the uncertainly defined purposes of social activism or artistic expression. When used as a visual documentation of the social conditions of those categories of people kept outside the frame of public visibility and recognition, photography surely contributes to public opinion and debate. However, the wide circulation in public spaces of photos illustrating private moments of an individual’s life inevitably raises the question as to whether her privacy is protected. The question becomes more urgent when those photos are sold at high price and the photographer gets benefits in terms of material reward and popularity. The private life of the individual portrayed in those photos becomes an object for public consumption. Does this use of photography as a means of social activism justify the potential violation of intimacy of private persons? Does the exhibition of these photos in art galleries make this use of photography a superior form of artistic expression? How can these photos sold in a commercial gallery differ from the photos used for more immediately commercial purposes like, for example, the photos of celebrities sold by paparazzi to tabloids? To reply to these questions is not an easy task. As Parsons superbly argues, ‘we need to acknowledge the complexity of the issue’ before any attempt to develop a theoretical framework explaining the relation between photography and privacy.

This complexity of the privacy issue seems to be mainly related to the great ambiguity in the way people limit access to personal information or have the right to control information about themselves. Theoretically, the people’s ability to restrict or to share the flow of appropriate information about themselves provides a kind of reassurance that their privacy is protected. But how can this form of information be controlled in cyberspace, where the circulation of information does not seem to be regulated by any well defined norm? What kind of personal information is deemed as appropriate for circulation in social networking sites? These questions are being widely debated in current thinking about informational privacy and many theories are being formulated.

In ‘Social networking sites and privacy as contextual integrity’, Miia Vistilä and Floora Ruokonen discuss one of these formulations, i.e. the theory of contextual integrity. The normative account of privacy holds that the distribution or flow of information in a specific context is to be regulated by norms that establish what kind of information is appropriate or inappropriate in that context. When norms of appropriateness internal to context or when norms of information flow across contexts have been disrupted, a violation of privacy occurs. But how can privacy claims be justified in the context of social networks, where the norms of appropriateness are not clearly articulated and the
reasonable expectations of privacy are based on the normative appropriateness borrowed from other contexts? Vistilä and Ruokonen correctly argue that the novelty of social networking experience demands the formulation of specific norms that can guide the user toward a better understanding of what kind of information and expectations are appropriate in the context of communication technology for the protection of her and others’ privacy. This goal may prove to be a difficult one to achieve, given the continuous changes of people’s approaches to social networks: while getting more familiar with, or more dependent on, internet communication, the person changes the way to see and recognise herself and others. Notwithstanding, the formulation of some norms would help the members of the virtual communities have a more positive social experience without the constant feeling of the impending threat of privacy violation. In spite of their virtual character, social networks offer an immediate space for the individual’s presentation of the self and for the relation of this specific self with a wider community.

The issue of informational privacy in relation to the individual’s self-reflection and self-presentation in virtual communities is discussed by Ilpo Helén and Karoliina Snell in their contribution on ‘Private life in bits and pieces: Digital and molecular personhood in the information age’. Here focus is on a specific form of informational privacy, i.e. medical data stored and circulated in biobank networks. The highly private character of health and genomic data makes the individual particularly sensitive to problems related to the protection of her personal privacy from intrusion. The focus group interviews conducted by Helén and Snell show the generally positive approach of the individual toward the circulation of her medical information for future research studies, believing that personal data stored in the biobanks are only used for biomedical research. However, as for all pieces of personal information circulating in cyberspace, may they be in the context of social networks or biobanks, the individual is left with the unpleasant feeling that she cannot have full control of the information flows, once they are turned into a digitalised form. The lack of transparency in the entire World Wide Web thus becomes the most immediate threat of privacy violation. Does it essentially matter whether the potential violation of the person’s privacy occurs in the popular social networks or in the socially useful biobanks?

In conclusion, there is neither conclusion nor the definitive formulation of a theoretical model that can be widely applied in any discourse on privacy. The variety and complexity of meanings of privacy reflects the multifaceted aspects of human experience, which cannot be easily explored within a single framework for interpretation. This book gives the reader the great opportunity to explore some of these aspects and to learn more about privacy - how important it
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is to us and how much we will miss it if it is neglected – and ultimately more about ourselves.