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# Age of Openness is a good thing

Rest at ease, privacy is alive and well. In fact, there is a Facebook group with more than 100,000 people with the mission to reclaim privacy.

Alarmists blame the new world of social media for a general erosion of privacy, and blame a new culture of openness for the WikiLeaks scandal, in which thousands of U.S. government documents have been released on the web.

Andrew Cohen ("The public confessional," Opinion, Dec. 8) wrote that the general decline in overall privacy is to blame for the WikiLeaks debacle, and said this is life in the Age of Openness.

While I don't totally disagree, I don't necessarily see the Age of Openness as a bad thing. There certainly are some privacy issues with sharing your life publicly online, but most of the gravest privacy violations have come because people have volunteered too much information about themselves, or in the case of the WikiLeaks scandal, have not been diligent enough in protecting what's private. In general, however, this new Age of Openness is a good thing. Some even call it revolutionary.

Sure, Twitter, Facebook and others allow more people to share the intimate details of their lives and pictures of their pets and children. Some share way too much. They believe that to be plugged in, they have to always share the most inane moments of their lives. I certainly don't need to know (or see a picture of) the breakfast that one of my "friends" has had. Nor do I really care if someone that I met five years ago really likes poutine at the Orange Julep. However, those people would be annoying even if it weren't for Facebook. Blaming Facebook for eroding privacy is like blaming newspapers for bad news.

Most people actually use social-media tools to share things that they believe would be useful to others, or to get feedback on their ideas.

Social media aren't for everyone. Some people are just too scared. They fear a platform that can publicly broadcast their lives. They believe that somehow Facebook will divulge their social insurance numbers and expose them to untold threats of identity theft. Corporations are also scared of social media, and about half block their employees' access to Facebook for fears they'll spend their entire day on the site.

Most people have these fears before they join, but the fact is you can be as private as you want to be, and share as much or as little as you like. You can also turn down friend requests. Once you get over your fear, you'll see quickly the incredible ability of social-media tools to create communities and to highlight important causes.

One good example of the power of social media is the recent campaign by a tribe in Orissa, India, to stop the development of a bauxite mine. The company, Vedanta Resources, was set to build the mine, which would have devastated the region and threatened the survival of the Dongria Kondh tribe.

With the help of humanrights groups, the tribe of 8,000 started a campaign on Facebook and Twitter to alert the world to the potential abuses.

Earlier this year, the tribe won its battle and the \$8 billion London-based company, Vedanta had its permission to develop a mine revoked by the Indian government.

Had this happened 25 years ago, the world would have probably been ignorant of the plight of the tribe, and its members would have been relocated by the company. But the new open nature of our society allows a message to be shared and spread around the world in a matter of seconds.

The Age of Openness no longer just refers to computers. Its becoming a huge trend in the corporate world. This year, Montreal-based Yellow Pages Group became the first directory company to release its API, which is its coding software, to the public. Google has done this for years, and the result has been thousands of applications developed by outsiders that have become major sources of revenue for the company.



The open-data philosophy is now extending into the public sector, with many movements, including one in Montreal, pushing local, provincial and national governments to make their data open and free to manipulate. The social media movement is no fad. It's the beginning of a movement that will change the world. Those who still have hangups should get over them, or they'll be left behind.

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