
Visions of Privacy: Policy Choices for the Digital Age. Edited by Colin J. Bennett and Rebecca Grant. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. 288 p. Includes bibliographical references and index. ISBN: 0-8020-4194-9 (hardcover) \$50.00; ISBN 0-8020-8050-2 (softcover) \$21.95.

This book is a collection of thirteen essays, most of which were offered as papers at a May 1996 international conference in Victoria, B.C. by various government officials and academics involved with privacy issues. While the delay between the date of the conference and the date of publication causes an initial concern, it is not that serious an issue since the perspectives presented by these essays are largely future-looking and raise various timeless issues on the topic of privacy in the digital age.

The book's bias, if there is one, is from the viewpoint of the individual consumer, a viewpoint generally seen as being

diametrically opposed to the interests of government bodies, large corporations and mass marketers that deal in the warehousing and dissemination of personal information (data gatherers). Implicit throughout most of the essays is the notion that technological developments make us all potentially vulnerable to privacy intrusions and that average persons may be unaware of the ways in which data gatherers compile and disseminate personal information, and even where they are aware of such activity, they may lack realistic options for stopping the intrusions.

The essays are introduced and concluded by the editors of the material, both University of Victoria professors, who do an admirable job of tying the material together. While there is some duplication of issues and ideas by some authors, this is understandable and helps to emphasize certain major points. The essays are presented in one of five parts: ethical and value choices, technological and regulatory choices, market choices, global choices, and choices for privacy advocates. Two of the essays are written by Canadian privacy commissioners (from B.C. and Ontario); ten of the seventeen contributors are university academics from American universities, typically from sociology, political or computer science departments.

Consistent themes throughout the book are the identification of technological developments, such as Internet usage, that threaten privacy; policy debates about whether privacy rights can truly be “balanced” with other rights and needs; and discussions of whether technology itself, through such things as biometric encryption (using one’s finger scan without divulging one’s identity), can provide solutions to protecting one’s privacy and the ability to control the flow of personal information.

The essays in the books range from fairly philosophical (such as the piece by Gary T. Marx on the ethics of surveillance and the values that we place on privacy) to fairly practical (such as the explanation of the privacy protections in Quebec, the jurisdiction in Canada with the most extensive privacy regulation). There are several pieces on the lack of adequate privacy protections in the health care industries in both Canada and the United States, as well as some discussion throughout of the European Union Data Protection Directive and its impact on American privacy practices. One of the most accessible articles is the piece by Professor James Rule and computer scientist Lawrence Hunter arguing for property rights in personal data that would give the individual the ability to charge a royalty every time an organization wanted to add the individual to a mailing list or otherwise use that individual’s personal data.

This is not a book for practitioners or those looking for a good overview on the law of privacy – the discussion is far too theoretical and policy-oriented for that. There are in fact only six judicial decisions mentioned in the index (although more cases are cited in the endnotes to individual articles) and there is no table of cases. Instead, the book is ideal for social and political scientists, government policy-makers, and legal and other academics involved with privacy issues and

decision-making at the policy level. Each article is well documented with endnotes. The book contains a relatively sparse index, a bibliography and an appendix of key Internet sites on privacy. There is also a short biography for each of the seventeen contributors (some of the thirteen essays were co-written), something which is useful in understanding the perspective each author brings to his or her essay.

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