

Privacy: Google's #bigtentuk debate [live blog]

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2011/05/18/privacy-googles-big-tent-debate-live-blog-bigtent/

2011-5-18

A big tent meeting is one that attracts diverse views says (my former boss) Peter Barron of Google at the beginning of their big [privacy debate](#) held in a huge margquee in the grounds of posh country hotel outside Watford. Not sure if it was a big enough tent to include Burson-Marsteller or Facebook.

Those who normally piss outside were present. So Simon Davies from [Privacy International](#) took to the purple stage alongside TV entrepreneur Peter Bazalgette.

Peter now works for Google so not surprisingly he wants business put at the heart of the debate.

Simon Davies warned of the hypocrisy of companies that complain that worries about privacy might prevent innovation and stymie enterprise. He said that it is corporate restrictions that stifle innovation, not regulation.

Peter B sees a future where people in effect trade aspects of their privacy in return for services online.

So already we see quite a traditional axis in this debate between 'commerce' and ethical campaigners in favour of intervention. With an engineer (Alma Whitten from Google) sitting uncomfortably in the middle.

Davies' point is that we don't need global rules, we need good local regulators with varying systems. 'The public's been angry about providers for some time, they should be angry with regulators who don't enforce the rules we have now' says Davies. 'As information changes from paper to digital the laws tends to adapt to meet changed conditions' said Davies

As Jon Snow (our mediator) pointed out, that's not a very clear solution to a problem that he thinks is effectively insoluble.

Bazalgette insisted that we should not accept that counsel of despair. People can make companies like Facebook change their behaviour when they find their privacy infringed, he said. But 'anyone who voluntarily surrenders data should have the right to retrieve it'. [Not quite sure how that happens – genies and bottles spring to mind]

Inevitably, Super Injunctions raise their head but no-one seems that bothered that various celebs have now seen their personal lives paraded across Twitter.

Jon Snow pointed out that innovation might not be stifled by privacy but what about truth? There seems some confusion at this point (and in real life) about the difference between personal and public information.

Does this huge debate come down in the end to better Terms and Conditions of Use agreements? So it's a legal issue. But as Alma from Google said it is also about systems that make trust a practical possibility. Are the systems for checking your data and protecting it easy to use and understand? As Bazalgette said, this daily practical trade of privacy for services is what matters not celebrities' sex lives.

Why not give individuals their own personal privacy ecosystem asks David Alexander from Mydex? Take it away from the companies like Google and give everyone their own dashboard. So you set your own terms and conditions instead of ticking the box on someone else's. Whitten doesn't object to that but doesn't know who is going to build those tools. Mydex, of course, insist that it's them..

Davies agreed that commercial contracts are a joke because no-one reads them, but that's the job of regulator's to sort out.

'All our laws are based around Old Media, and New Media makes it look an ass' says Bazalgette in response to the

how should you control Twitter question. 'but I have no idea how it should change'

Google's Whitten is just relieved that it's not her job to sort this out – but she's right that this is still an evolving situation and it is difficult to find a solution to a problem that is still developing. Neatly summed by Snow as 'the slush'.

Question from the floor: Is it hypocritical to impose constraint on an individual while the media often publishes things that aren't true?

Heather Brooke (investigative journalist) from the floor: I can't think of innovation stifled by privacy but I can think of many examples of investigative journalism from MPs expenses to EU subsidies that suffers because of law of privacy

Summaries:

Baz: public interest is key, but where to draw the line?

Alma Whitten: importance of figuring out checks and balances, safety, privacy, public interest all need to be at the table

Davies: Pakistan is creating legal grounds for banning Internet (on grounds of religious offence) – you have to argue that it's a great sin to close down freedoms – happens with every new media technology from printing onwards. Shock of the new should promote freedom of information not censorship.

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science