

From the Kitchen

30 November 2011



Every time I flash my loyalty card at the supermarket, the details of my purchases are added to a database, connected to whatever the company knows about me. In return, I am allocated a point for every dollar over \$30 I spend. Each point represents about one tenth of one percent of that over-\$30 expenditure.

I can only guess at what happens to all that information. Actually, I can do better than guess, because others have written about it and continue to write about it. It is used by the supermarket owner and others to try and get me to buy more, through targeted advertising in emails. The ‘others’ are companies to which the supermarket owner sells information about me and my purchases. I expect that one day the display monitor at the checkout will list items I may have forgotten, because the supermarket ‘knows’ I buy them almost every time.

Why do I have a loyalty card? Because the points I accumulate can be converted to flying miles with an airline or be exchanged for goods. I once exchanged 26 000 points for a new steam iron, which I could have bought for about \$75. I have yet to use frequent flyer points for flying.

I wonder sometimes if all the companies that collect data on consumers will eventually drown in the digital sea. Will they accumulate so much data that they can no longer make effective use of it? How do they manage to keep the growing data pool useful, when some companies and government departments I have dealt with seem to have a problem making sense of the little bit of data they hold about me, when there is something I need from *them*?

I have trained myself to ignore much of the advertising in newspapers and on the internet, to minimise the distraction of its quiet insistence. However, recently a ‘sponsored’ advertisement next to a Google search result caught my eye. It was for a company from which I bought a camera lens about six months ago. Coincidence? I assumed so, until advertisements from that company kept appearing, no matter what I searched for. The next day I did an experiment. In an office where I work part-time, I carried out some specific searches on the company computer, including searches involving cameras and lenses. The particular advertisements did not appear. I then did the same searches using my personal laptop. Bingo! There it was.

The mobile internet connection I use for my laptop goes through the same ISP as my network at home. I plugged my laptop into the wired network at the office (which uses a different ISP) and I repeated the searches. No advertisements from that company. It is understandable that I get paranoid when I *know* they’re watching me.

So many people, these days, *want* to be visible to all and sundry – to people they know and ones they have never met. Many also invite offers from businesses that may give them even a small chance of receiving something in return. They are willing to lay their lives open to the world.

I find this curious, as in some sectors of our society people have for a long time been voicing an increasing concern about the amount of personal information about them held by

governments, business and other institutions. Is there a spontaneous shift in the attitude people have to privacy and personal data or have those who benefit from this been successful in a cynical plan to bring this about? Will those of us who still value our privacy be swept along until the distinction private/public ceases to exist?

Whether the erosion of this distinction is deliberate or not, it is insidious. There is a trading of what was once considered to be entirely personal for some perceived gain or benefit. My accumulation of loyalty points at the supermarket is a perceived gain but may deliver no actual benefits, or the benefits may be exceeded by real and notional losses.

With the ease offered by the internet to sign up for 'newsletters' and other 'services' in return for scraps of information about ourselves, we may be giving up more than we are aware of at each instance. It is easy to forget from one click to the next how much of ourselves we have revealed and we have no way of knowing how these scraps are shared, collated, cross-referenced and stored, until we see advertisements specifically targeted to our personal likes and dislikes and to our habits.