

Myat Thit Ko Ko

Professor Lemon

English C1001

April 5th 2026

### Importance of Privacy throughout the History of America

A bright young man was rejected by his dream pilot academy after administrators reviewed confidential therapy records that had been shared between institutions without his consent. The culprit was not his mental health awareness but rather the invasion of privacy that took his wings. Cambridge Dictionary defines privacy as “the right that someone has to keep their personal life or personal information secret or known only to a small group of people”. For a nation founded on the ideology of freedom, the United States has progressively steered toward surveillance over anonymity from the last century. In *the Known Citizen*, historian Sarah Igo argues that privacy in America has evolved alongside legal, technological, and social changes. During the age of manifest destiny, land owners had full control of their private property and household privacy. Later on, as population boomed and global conflicts loomed, new privacy concerns arose. Developments in technology increased convenience and reduced privacy standards. By the 1970s, due to computational record-keeping systems, the general public found themselves trapped in a record prison where they would be denied an opportunity for something minor they had done years prior. Today, major American tech companies collect and store vast amounts of user data through tracking files. To create a future in which privacy is respected, efforts to advocate for privacy protections must be prioritized. Privacy is essential for a contemporary society because it protects individual liberty, reduces cyber risks, and limits government control.

Historically, privacy protected the freedom to develop individuality. In the early ages of the United States, the federal government was less powerful, and European settlers were scattered across the continent with relatively little oversight. As a result, Americans experienced a high degree of individual freedom shaped by limited governance and low population density. This emphasis on individual liberty was enshrined in the fourth amendment of the constitution, which protects the people from unreasonable searches on private property. Therefore, private property and households were treated as sacred personal spaces. As Sarah Igo notes, a late nineteenth-century essay depicted “a man’s house as his castle” (39). This metaphor suggests that the home functioned not only as a physical property, but as a protected shelter where individuals could exist privately from external scrutiny. The absence of surveillance allowed for increased independence. Hence, self autonomy relies on being an unknown citizen.

Moreover, privacy protects the freedom of self-expression without constant social observation. In a contemporary society, married couples move to suburban areas to raise families away from densely populated cities. However, local community organizations such as neighborhood watch programs or homeowner associations would keep their eyes on these newly-wed couples moving into the area. As a result, everyday behavior becomes socially visible, where any faux pas may lead to gossip and reputational harm. This contradicts the ideal desire of private citizens who wish to "simply be rather than be respectable" (Igo 120). In other words, identity becomes externally shaped instead of internally chosen. Similarly, Ayn Rand, an author who advocated individual liberty through her work, claimed that “civilization is the progress toward a society of privacy. The savage's whole existence is public, ruled by the laws of his tribe. Civilization is the process of setting man free from men” (84). Therefore, privacy evolved from a concept tied to physical property into the ability to act without constant

judgement from others. The value of privacy, however, remains just as important, if not more, because modern forms of social publicity continue to shape how individuals present themselves.

Furthermore, technological advancement has increased convenience while simultaneously creating new threats to privacy. In the last century, commercial newspapers, telegraphs, and photography became widely accessible to the public. These developments introduced new ways for personal information to be recorded and shared, which consequently weakened privacy due to lack of strong legal protections. Telegraphs, for example, required copies of private conversations stored at multiple locations, increasing the risk of interception compared to traditional sealed mail, which was delivered directly from sender to recipient (Igo 28). Although this technology improved the speed and efficiency of communication, it also normalized the exposure of personal information across various points of access. As a result, individuals increasingly accepted reduced privacy in exchange for convenience. This pattern continues today in digital communication systems.

Additionally, excessive data collection in the digital age increases privacy risks. It is important to manage online privacy settings properly and be mindful of what is shared online as anyone could abuse sensitive public data for malicious purposes such as identity theft or unauthorized profiling. Moreover, in today's interconnected world, individuals generate a significant amount of personal data through their digital footprint, the trail of data left behind through online activities. For example, a typical modern website collects user behaviors through tracking technologies such as cookies in the name of personalizing content and advertisements. Even if users reject tracking, many websites still store essential cookies required for basic functionality. It raises concerns about how much information is still being collected without full user control. In addition, algorithmic tracking can feel invasive when social media feeds display

targeted content that was part of a private conversation a few days prior. This creates the perception of constant surveillance.

Lastly, privacy is essential for limiting government control. Record keeping of each individual regardless of criminal history was coercive to privacy standards. For example, the Social Security Board (SSB), once required race identification in application form, which raised concerns that such information could be used to track an individual's ancestry for discriminatory purposes. Despite their firm assurance to respect confidentiality policies, they eventually gave in through a "relaxation of standards" to provide assistance towards drafting young men to war (Igo 80). This historical example raises concerns about how institutions may repurpose personal information under shifting political needs. Moreover, privacy is also essential for preserving political autonomy in democratic societies. If a private person can be influenced to act in a desired condition, the result would simply be an illusion of choice. In modern contexts, similar concerns arise through digital platforms where algorithms can be designed to promote certain posts and ideologies. Like-minded individuals are fed with the same partial truths, resulting in formation of echo chambers with different outlooks on the world. This would lead to a divided population, which can be the easiest to influence and control.

On the other hand, some conformists might argue that individuals should not fear breach of privacy unless they have something to hide in the first place. However, their claim is often accompanied by a few logical fallacies including a false dilemma, and a straw man argument. It presents the false dilemma by assuming that individuals either use privacy to conceal wrongdoing or have no reason to value privacy at all. In reality, privacy serves broader purposes such as protecting autonomy and preventing the misuse of personal data as highlighted in earlier paragraphs. In addition, their statement misrepresents the privacy argument by claiming that

people only seek privacy to hide wrongdoing, which ignores concerns related to surveillance through institutional record keeping. Governmental record systems, for example, can be flawed and individuals may be wrongfully penalized because records often reduce complex human behavior to simplified data sets which can lack moral context. Therefore, dissent may be discouraged, since individuals protesting for a change of law may end up with a record of arrest that may influence their future prospects. For these reasons, the argument against privacy by claiming that someone is needless of worry if they have nothing to hide is invalid.

In conclusion, the evolution of privacy in the United States reflects a broader shift in the understanding of freedom itself from a focus on physical space and property to the protection of personal identity, thought, and autonomy. As technological advancements continue to reshape how information is collected and shared, privacy is under attack by institutions that attempt to store sensitive information without explicit user consent. Therefore, the importance of privacy only grew more significant. Furthermore, privacy is essential not only for safeguarding individual dignity but also for maintaining the integrity of democratic systems and social trust. Without meaningful protections, the balance of power can easily favor institutions that possess the tools to monitor and influence behavior through constant surveillance as well as propaganda content on online platforms. Therefore, preserving privacy is not only about limiting intrusion, but also about ensuring that individuals retain control over their lives in an increasingly interconnected world. Looking forward, continued developments in data tracking, satellite monitoring, and AI tools suggest that privacy may become even more difficult to preserve unless stronger legal and technological standards are enforced.

Works Cited

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