



Office of the Information and
Privacy Commissioner of Alberta

Op-Ed for Data Privacy Day 2020

Learning About Privacy Needs to Be Out in the Open

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This op-ed was submitted to several media outlets in Alberta.

Today is Data Privacy Day. A day to reflect on privacy rights over the past decade and how to move privacy discussions forward over the next 10 years.

Revelations of societal surveillance were continuous during the 2010s. Government mass surveillance programs were exposed early in the decade. The focus turned more recently to the digital economy and “surveillance capitalism”.

If you are over the age of 20, the societal shifts have been monumental. Smartphones and many apps we install collect troves of personal information – from location tracking to contact lists and call logs. These and other technologies revolutionized our work worlds, learning environments and social spaces in less than 15 years.

Meanwhile, if you are under the age of 20, this is how the world has always operated. As a result, this demographic has a nuanced understanding of privacy and online reputation, often through their experiences of trial-and-error in figuring out how to protect themselves.

The digital economy is pervasive in all aspects of young people’s lives. There are thousands of educational apps used in classrooms. “Free” messaging apps are how families interact with one another. Of course, there are platforms for friends too, such as gaming communities or social media sites.

The influence of tech starts young. Many of us – myself included – have marveled at or commented on how adeptly some preschoolers navigate apps on a tablet or smartphone.

These developments are not inherently nefarious. Networked spaces connect the world. The ingenuity of some of these services is astonishing, and academics and developers – several of whom are from Alberta – are creating innovations in all industries for the public good.

There is however a void in knowing the impacts of surveillance technologies on our privacy rights. We often don't know what is happening behind the scenes with our data in attempts to influence our spending habits or political choices, as examples.

As increasingly sophisticated techniques to collect, analyze and distribute data are developed, these surveillance technologies are likened to a black box. We know what the purpose is but we don't know what's inside.

I believe it is vital for us to fill that informational vacuum in Alberta's classrooms by embedding conversations about what personal information is, how it is being used and monetized, and how better we can make informed choices about the services we sign on to through the curriculum review process and other initiatives.

To that end, my office is a supporter of [The eQuality Project](#), a seven-year research program led by Valerie Steeves and Jane Bailey at the University of Ottawa. The project is a partnership of scholars, research and policy institutes, educators, community groups, and youth. I am proud to say it has a strong Alberta contingent. In addition to my office's support, the Government of Alberta and Alberta Teachers' Association are project partners.

What I have learned through our support of The eQuality Project and its research is that children and youth don't need to be lectured about privacy and online safety. We do however need to signal to students – and adults, for that matter – that talking about these topics is important to our growth and development as individuals and as a society. It is also central to understanding our rights as citizens. The lesson plans and research resulting from The eQuality Project provide teachers and parents with guides for facilitating these discussions.

In February, one such opportunity to think and talk about privacy is taking place in Alberta. The eQuality Project and Alberta Teachers' Association are partnering on the #DisconnectChallenge Alberta. Nearly 10,000 Albertans have signed up to participate, including teachers, parents and students.

I encourage anyone interested to visit disconnectchallenge.ca to learn more about the challenge and its goals, and to continue to learn more about your privacy rights over the next decade to help make informed choices online and discover how to take back some control over your personal information.

Jill Clayton is the Information and Privacy Commissioner of Alberta. The Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner of Alberta regulates and enforces the province's freedom of information and privacy laws. The OIPC also provides education on freedom of information and privacy issues.