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Data-mining the data miners

The case of murdered Colombian student Anna Maria Chávez Niño, presented at this week's [Privacy Open Space](#), encompasses both extremes of the privacy conundrum posed by a world in which [400 million people](#) post intimate details about themselves and their friends onto a single, corporately owned platform. The [gist](#): Chávez met her murderers on Facebook; her brother tracked them down, also on Facebook.

Speaking via video link to Cédric Laurant, a Brussels-based independent privacy consultant, Juan Camilo Chávez noted that his sister might well have made the same mistake - inviting dangerous strangers into her home - by other means. But without Facebook he might not have been able to identify the killers. Criminals, it turns out, [are just as clueless about what they post online](#) as anyone else. Armed with the CCTV images, Chávez trawled Facebook for similar photos. He found the murderers selling off his sister's jacket and guitar. As they say, busted.

This week's PrivacyOS was the fourth in a series of EU-sponsored conferences to collaborate on solutions to that persistent, growing, and increasingly complex problem: how to protect privacy in a digital world. This week's focused on the cloud.

"I don't agree that privacy is disappearing as a social value," said [Ian Brown](#), one of the event's organizers, disputing Mark [privacy-is-no-longer-a-social-norm](#) Zuckerberg's claim. The world's social values don't disappear, he added, just because some California teenagers don't care about them.

Do we protect users through regulation? Require subject releases for YouTube or [Qik](#)? Require all browsers to ship with cookies turned off? As [Lilian Edwards](#) observed, the latter would simply make many users think the Internet is broken. My notion: require social networks to add a field to photo uploads requiring users to enter an expiration date after which it will be deleted.

But, "This is meant to be a free world," Humberto Morán, managing director of [Friendly Technologies](#), protested. Free as in [speech](#), free as in beer, or free as in the bargain we make with our data so we can use Facebook or Google? We have no control over those privacy policy contracts.

"Nothing is for free," observed [NEC's Amardeo Sarma](#). "You pay for it, but you don't know how you pay for it." The key issue.

What [frequent flyers](#) know is that they can get free flights once in a while in return for their data. What even the brightest, most diligent, and [most paranoid expert](#) cannot tell them is what the consequences of that trade will be 20 years from now, though the [Privacy Value Networks](#) project is

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attempting to quantify this. It's hard: any photographer will tell you that a picture's value is usually highest when it's new, but sometimes suddenly skyrockets decades later when its subject shoots unexpectedly to prominence. Similarly, the value of data, said David Houghton, changes with time and context.

It would be more right to say that it is difficult for users to understand the trade-offs they're making and there are no incentives for government or commerce to make it easy. And, as the recent "You have 0 Friends" episode of [South Park](#) neatly captures, the choice for users is often not between being careful and being careless but between being a hermit and participating in [modern life](#).

Better tools ought to be a partial solution. And yet: the market for privacy-enhancing technologies is littered with market failures. Even the [W3C's own Platform for Privacy Preferences \(P3P\)](#), for example, is not deployed in the current generation of browsers - and when it was provided in Internet Explorer users didn't take advantage of it. The projects outlined at PrivacOS - [PICOS](#) and [PrimeLife](#) - are frustratingly slow to move from concept to prototype. The ideas seem right: providing a way to limit disclosures and authenticate identity to minimize data trails. But, Lilian Edwards asked: is partial consent or partial disclosure really possible? It's not clear that it is, partly because your friends are also now posting information about you. The idea of a decentralized social network, workshopped at one session, is interesting, but might be as likely to expand the problem as modulate it.

And, as it has throughout the 25 years since the first online communities were founded, the problem keeps growing exponentially in size and complexity. The next frontier, said [Thomas Roessler](#): the sensor Web that incorporates location data and input from all sorts of devices throughout our lives. What does it mean to design a privacy-friendly bathroom scale that tweets your current and goal weights? What happens when the data it sends gets mashed up with the site you use to monitor the calories you consume and burn and your online health account? Did you really understand when you gave your initial consent to the site what kind of data it would hold and what the secondary uses might be?

So privacy is hard: to define, to value, to implement. As [Seda Gürses](#), studying how to incorporate privacy into social networks, said, privacy is a process, not an event. "You can't do x and say, Now I have protected privacy."

Wendy M. Grossman's [Web site](#) has an extensive archive of her books, articles, and music, and an [archive of all the earlier columns in this series](#). This blog eats non-spam comments for reasons surpassing understanding.

Posted by Wendy M. Grossman on April 16, 2010 3:29 PM | [Permalink](#)

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