

THE CONSULTANT ANNA JOHNSTON

PRIVACY is about human dignity. It's not about secrecy, but about preserving our sense of self. We all need private time and private space in which to reflect, share intimacies, express joy or grief, or just go about our daily lives.

Even public figures – regardless of whether they choose a public life – deserve the freedom to work out at the gym, take a shower or seek medical treatment, without the fear of exposure that can bring ridicule or humiliation.

Privacy is also about what we choose to share of ourselves. What you tell your work colleagues may be very different from what you reveal to your GP or your partner. What better example do we have of modern privacy in action than social networking sites, on which members actively construct their identities, by choosing what about themselves they reveal to their friends, to friends of friends, and to the world at large? You may question whether these choices are always well-informed or wise, but they are choices nonetheless.

Privacy must of course be



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held in balance with other public interests, but I don't believe that we must necessarily trade our privacy in exchange for more security, or better healthcare, or the benefits of technology. The protection of privacy is often essential to securing other public benefits.

For example, research has shown that many people will avoid seeking medical treat-

ment if they believe their privacy will not be respected – especially teenagers, and adults with sexual health, mental health or substance abuse concerns. Both public and individual health outcomes are best served when privacy controls are robust and trusted. As we await the introduction of shared electronic health records, the Facebook generation will expect finely calibrated personal controls over who can see what of their health information. The expected public health benefits of shared e-health records depend on high levels of participation, and therefore public trust in the way privacy will be protected.

Privacy is a value which enables each of us some choice or control over how our personal information is used, and how our behaviour or communications are monitored. It is as relevant today – in this age of social media, e-health records and celebrity gossip mags – as it ever was.

Anna Johnston is director of Salingier Privacy. She was previously deputy privacy commissioner of NSW.

➔ **ONLINE POLL** To comment on this week's question and to answer the online poll, go to smh.com.au/the-question.

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THE EDITOR FIONA CONNOLLY

I HAD a call from a newspaper journalist last week who had heard a rumour I was about to blow the lid on the tawdry past of a certain cricket star's wife. Apparently I'd hired a computer hacker; a trained "Facebook specialist" with the ability to recover profiles well after they had been taken down. As such, I was in possession of some hot photos which the couple were nervously expecting to see in *Woman's Day*.

I had a chuckle to myself during that call – I just love that the Gen Y's in my office are gaining reputations as genius codebreakers: It was no accident though, I didn't hire them for their spelling, that's for sure; it's their Facebook-keeping skills I need.

The reporter was right, I am in possession of some information on the cricketer's wife, but it didn't take an ASIO spy to uncover it. One of my "hackers" took about 20 minutes trawling social networking sites to find it. The cricketer's wife had taken down her profile but by getting in quickly and contacting her friends, we had a good starting point.

But the question here isn't whether a celebrity or even a



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celebrity's wife or partner can expect to achieve privacy – that's a no-brainer. Human curiosity means celebrities will never achieve privacy and nor should they expect it. In one hand you have fame, in the other privacy. It's a tradeoff, and it's why I suspect so many celebrities tweet; they have accepted they are public property and they are happily running with it.

➔ **LAST WEEK'S RESULT** Should we alter our constitution to recognise indigenous Australians? Of 3033 respondents, 30 per cent voted no; 70 per cent said yes.

The question is whether privacy, in its purest, en masse form, is a lost cause altogether. Again, I have only to look to my hackers for the answer. I can think of only a handful of occasions where I've asked my staff to track down someone and they haven't been able to do it. One was just this week and when I demanded to know why we couldn't find the missing piece of our latest amazing crime story, my news editor meekly replied, "It turns out she's in witness protection."

As a frustrated young cadet journalist scanning electoral rolls and knocking on one door after another until I had the right "Andrew Smith" or "John Jones", I might have argued that people who want to remain anonymous easily could. But now that we face-book, tweet, join forums, email and blog – and in doing so can get closer and quicker to anyone in the world – it's not just celebrities faced with a tradeoff, it's all of us. If we want the best of the world's communications, we can wave goodbye to privacy.

Fiona Connolly is editor of *Woman's Day*.