

Do broadband and Big Brother go hand in hand?

High-speed ‘always-on’ broadband networks make it vastly easier to collect, aggregate and analyse personal information, and transmit this information to others, pushing protection of personal privacy to prominence in the broadband policy debate.

As the US National Broadband Plan points out, it is now possible for even a single firm to build up individual ‘digital identity’ profiles, ‘including web searches, sites visited, click-stream, email contacts and content, map searches, geographic location and movements, calendar appointments, mobile phone book, health records, educational records, energy usage, pictures and videos, social networks, locations visited, eating, reading, entertainment preferences, and purchasing history.’ [See note 1](#)

Sharing certain personal information helps deliver services that people want. Mark Zuckerberg, founder of the social networking site Facebook, which now has 500 million users, has controversially stated that privacy is “no longer a social norm”. [See note 2](#)

Nevertheless, there are fears that growing public concern over online privacy will hold back development of broadband services unless users are confident that their personal data is secure and will not be used for purposes they have not agreed to. For example:

- E-health applications, such as electronic storage and exchange of health records, and ‘telemedicine’ that will enable online medical consultations and remote health checks on elderly or sick patients at home, promise huge benefits for patients. But people need to be sure that sensitive medical records will be protected from unauthorized access and, in the case of

telemedicine, that they are indeed communicating with a health professional bound by confidentiality rules.

- Smart grid systems will enable electricity companies and consumers to save energy, cut waste, and link renewable energy sources such as solar panels to the grid. However, smart grids require smart meters, which are read remotely throughout the day. This will make it possible to compile a picture of when household members get up, go out or get home, what appliances they use most and when they go on holiday. [See note 3](#)
- Location-based services – including smart transport systems to manage traffic as well as commercial applications - use GPS (Global Positioning Satellite) technology to identify the user's movements and precise whereabouts at any time.

Alexander Ntoko, ITU's head of corporate strategy and its expert on cybersecurity issues, says it will be important for broadband development that each country has clear privacy policies, but casts doubt on prospects for agreeing common global privacy rules. [See note 4](#)

While there could be international consensus on certain broad principles, he says – for example, that individuals should have control over use of their personal data – governments will differ in how they implement those principles and the balance they wish to strike between privacy and other concerns such as crime or national security.⁵ Culture, religion, politics and other factors also influence how much information Internet users themselves wish to divulge.

Ntoko stresses that the ITU, as a technical agency, focuses on security and authentication technologies that provide strong protection for personal data, leaving decisions on privacy policy to individual governments. “Over 200 countries and territories are connected through the internet but that does not mean national and community differences are going to disappear,” Ntoko observes.

Note 1 National Broadband Plan: Connecting America, Federal Communications Commission, 2010:
<http://www.broadband.gov/plan/4-broadband-competition-and-innovation-policy/>

Note 2 Bobbie Johnson, 'Privacy no longer a social norm, says Facebook founder', The Guardian, 11 January 2010:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2010/jan/11/facebook-privacy>

Note 3 Steve Lohr, 'Tracking electric use could allow utilities to track you too', New York Times, 15 March 2010:

<http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/03/15/tracking-electric-use-could-allow-utilities-to-track-you-too/>

Note 4 Bobbie Johnson, 'Google urges UN to set global internet privacy rules', The Guardian, 14 September 2007:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2007/sep/14/news.google>

Note 5 'The clash of data civilisations', The Economist, 19 June 2010:

<http://www.economist.com/node/16377097>