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Soraj Hongladarom

A Buddhist Theory of Privacy

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Preface

This is a book about the philosophical underpinnings of privacy. However, what distinguishes it from most other books on the topic is that it is based on a Buddhist conception. The ideas in the book have had their beginnings in the articles that I have written before, but they are elaborated here in greater detail so it is not just a rehashing of the existing literature. Basically, this means that Buddhist insights serve as a foundation for a theory on privacy. Philosophically speaking, Buddhism is best known for its view that the self is ultimately non-existent, much like a rainbow is non-existent when observed up close. As information privacy is traditionally based on the idea that the individual has autonomy and dignity, which is argued from the view that there is a subsisting core to the individual, the book offers an alternative view that the foundation for privacy could be found on the radical idea that the individual does not have to be metaphysically self-subsistent, and accordingly privacy should be justified more on pragmatic grounds rather than metaphysical ones. Moreover, I also argue that this alternative view offers a more effective way to theorize about some newer forms of privacy that have emerged due to recent advances in technology, such as group privacy.

This short book has been long in the making. The first ideas were conceived back in 2007 and 2008 when I was engaged in a project of searching for a justification for the information privacy while preserving cultural identity. I received an opportunity to travel to Norway and Sweden in the winter of 2008 as an Erasmus Mundus exchange scholar, where I had a large extended period of free time during my teaching duties to start thinking seriously on the topic which eventually presented itself in this book. I would like to thank May Thorseth and Siri Granum Carson, who hosted me while I worked at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim in October 2008, and Göran Collste at Linköping University in Sweden, who hosted me while I moved from Trondheim to finish up the latter part of my stay as the Erasmus Mundus scholar in November of the same year. I would also like to thank Chulalongkorn University for granting me a sabbatical leave from October 2008 to September 2009, which enabled me the time to think more about the work and to do all the necessary research. After that the book

got a long hiatus when I was engaged in other duties, and it is only in 2015 that I finally managed to put up a block of free time to push up this book to the shape it has taken at this moment.

The thanks would not be complete if I failed to acknowledge my debt to Charles Ess, who is both a friend and a colleague who kept pushing and challenging me to sharpen my ideas. We were interested in the topic of intercultural information ethics, and the conferences and seminars that he organized, especially the series of conferences on Cultural Attitude toward Technology and Communication (CATaC—<http://www.cataconference.org/>) played a very important role in my development as a scholar. My thanks also go to Rafael Capurro, who also gave me many opportunities to develop my research capabilities and critical thinking skills. Both Ess and Capurro are deeply interested in privacy and its cultural implications, the topic which develops itself into this book. I am deeply indebted to both of them.

Bangkok, Thailand
October 2015

Soraj Hongladarom

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Chapter 1

Privacy in the World Today

Our societies, in the West and increasingly in the developing countries, are becoming saturated with technology. Let us imagine a day in a life of an ordinary person in such a society. He gets up from bed, and if he is a middle-class worker in Bangkok his bedroom will almost certainly be air-conditioned. Then he might log on his computer, which is always connected with the Internet through broadband network to check up morning news and his emails. Then he drives from his gated community from the outskirts of the city to work. He drives past the security post in front of his community, and his car is being observed and recorded through video surveillance in his community. Then he drives to work, stopping for gas. He uses his credit card to pay for it, and perhaps he does not know that his credit card number was submitted and recorded in the database of the bank in order to find out if he has had any bad credit records. Then when he entered his office, his entrance was recorded again by another system of video surveillance. He might enter his card into the employee system, recording the time of his arrival. He might even have to enter a set of numbers in order to enter the gate of his office.

Once he got to his room, he turned on his office computer again. There is a chance that his computer is being wired with the central server that records what kind of information passes through his computer; which websites he was watching; what keystrokes have been entered through his keyboard. He might buy something on the Internet, entering his credit card into the website, trusting that the seller does not abuse his number. Since he has bought something from this website before, the website has installed a cookie on his machine so that when he comes back the website knows his identity and his past purchase records. When he went back home, he orders a pizza for his family from the phone. But he is surprised to find out that once he gave the operator his phone number, she knew his name, his home address, and his pizza preferences. He wonders whether the pizza company knows more about him than what was told to him during the phone conversation. Furthermore, the devices in his home might be already talking to one another, and this includes also the devices on his body. His watch might be talking with his air-conditioner, for example, giving the status of his body temperature to the latter so that the latter could modify the ambient temperature in his room accordingly. The refrigerator might also be talking with the grocery store nearby so that when something is about to run out, the store will be notified and arrange the delivery on