

[On not giving a stuff about privacy online](#) [1]

Written by [Sam Bowman](#) [2] | Friday 8 June 2012



I'm in today's City AM debating about [whether we can trust social networking sites with our data](#) [3]. My basic point is that, if we want it, they will provide it:

If people want privacy, the profit motive will give social networks a good incentive to offer it to them ? Social networks have to constantly innovate and compete with each other to stay alive. If ever there was a good reason for other sites to improve security, losing users ? valued for Facebook at \$121 each ? is it.

Against me is Big Brother Watch's Nick Pickles, who I like very much and who has spoken at ASI events in the past. I won't try to paraphrase his argument, but I strongly recommend [reading his side too](#) [3].

What I didn't have space to discuss is my suspicion that most social networking users just don't care about their privacy. Many might say they're concerned about keeping their activity secret, but talk is cheap. When you look at actual user behaviour, the evidence that people really care about privacy is fairly thin.

Facebook is notorious for its difficult-to-understand privacy controls, yet it's the most popular social network by a country mile. I couldn't find any data about this online, but most active Twitter accounts seem to be public instead of private. When Google+ launched, it sold itself as a privacy-friendly alternative to Facebook, but has not succeeded despite massive backing and cross-product integration from Google. (As a Google fanboy, I'm a little disappointed by that!)

Diaspora, a community-built alternative to Facebook which has placed privacy protection at the centre of its mission has not attracted many users. True, the network strength of a Facebook or a Twitter mean that switching sites can be costly for users ? a social network is only as valuable as its user base ? but that didn't save MySpace, Orkut or Bebo in countries where they were popular, and I strongly doubt it will save Facebook or Twitter when a genuinely superior service emerges.

Even security ? not having your account hacked into ? may not be very important to a lot of users. [Many people still use awful passwords like, er, ?password?](#) [4], ?123456?, ?qwerty?, and so on. It's possible that they're just ignorant of the dangers, but given the media coverage for any large website security breach, this seems less to me than the idea that they just don't really care if their LinkedIn account is hacked into.

Fundamentally, I see the relationship between users and social networking sites as being far more benign and positive than Nick and others who are concerned about privacy. Like when I give the bank my money for a trivial interest rate, I am effectively giving up my data in exchange for 'free' services ? ATM use from banks, and reasonably decent communication tools from Facebook and Twitter.

As I say in City AM, the great thing about these websites is that they're utterly disposable. Nobody needs Twitter to lead a good life. Those social network users who want better privacy can go to the sites offering them. But, since most people don't use social networks at all, maybe we have that divide already.

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