

"The Privacy Paradox" -- A report on a Critical Information Literacy (CIL) assignment integrated into Digital Media and Communication (COMM 309) by Dr. Thomas F. Corrigan, Associate Professor, CSUSB's Department of Communication Studies in fulfillment of CSUSB's [CIL Award for Faculty](#)

[Background](#) - [Syllabus](#) - [Assignment](#) - [Outcomes](#) - [Lab Materials](#) - [Assessment](#) - [Results](#) - [Reflection](#)

Background: Note to Self's "the Privacy Paradox" Challenge Week

The WNYC podcast [Note to Self](#) describes itself as "the tech show about being human." Since January 2015, *Note to Self* has produced three "challenge weeks" consisting of short, daily podcasts that help listeners better understand some aspect of their digital lives. For instance, the ["Bored and Brilliant"](#) challenge week focused on digital distractions, ["Infomagical"](#) addressed information overload, and ["the Privacy Paradox"](#) examined online data collection. Importantly, at the end of each day's episode, listeners are asked to undertake an activity that, through engagement, sheds light on the topic and provides an opportunity to take (somewhat) more control of our digital lives.

Take, for instance, ["the Privacy Paradox."](#) As *Note to Self* host, Manoush Zamorodi explains: "The goal of the Privacy Paradox is to help you understand more about where your information goes, to help you weigh the trade-offs, and then help you make digital decisions you feel better about." So, on [Day 1 of "the Privacy Paradox"](#), participants receive a podcast (via e-mail) featuring a conversation between Ms. Zomorodi and security technologist and cryptographer Bruce Schneier. In their conversation, Schneier distinguishes between 1) the *data* that constitute our online correspondence, and 2) the *metadata* associated with those online behaviors:

Schneier: So imagine I hired a private detective to eavesdrop on you. That private detective would put a bug in your home, maybe your car, or in your office. And I would get a report of your conversations. That's the data. If I asked that same detective to put you under surveillance, I get a very different sort of report: where you went; who you spoke to; what you read; what you looked at. That's the metadata. Metadata is surveillance data. It is incredibly personal.

Zomorodi: And that metadata has value to lots of people. Criminals, sure. But also the government, and -- most of all -- marketers. It's very private stuff! We have little say over who gets it, and once it's out there, we can't take it back.

To illustrate this surveillance process, that day's episode then asks listeners to open their phone's settings and find out what (meta)data each app on their phone is gathering about them. The process can be quite startling: "Why does my flashlight app need access to my camera and my contact list?" Moreover, participants learn that they can quickly control whether any particular app has access to their (meta)data. Thus, through this "challenge," participants deepen their understanding of online data collection, and they gain (somewhat) more control over their digital lives.

Smartphone (meta)data collection is, of course, only one component of the online data industry. So, over the next four days, participants receive another "Privacy Paradox" episode each morning that explores more parts of the puzzle, including what data our Web browsers collect, how marketers actually use those data, and the impact this ubiquitous surveillance has on our behaviors. And, again, each episode asks users to engage in specific activity that deepens listeners' understandings and helps them "make digital decisions you feel better about."

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[Background](#) - [Syllabus](#) - [Assignment](#) - [Outcomes](#) - [Lab Materials](#) - [Assessment](#) - [Results](#) - [Reflection](#)

Adapting "the Privacy Paradox" to Digital Media and Communication (COMM 309)

For this Critical Information Literacy assignment, I adapted *Note to Self's* "Privacy Paradox" challenge week for my Digital Media and Communication course ([syllabus here](#)). I have, for several years, taught a unit on online data collection (by both marketers and governments); however, the Privacy Paradox presented an opportunity to deepen students' *understanding, engagement, and agency* with respect to this increasingly pervasive aspect of digital life.

The Privacy Paradox challenges aligned particularly well with two principles of Critical Information Literacy: that "information is a process;" and that "information has value." From the CIL lab materials, I specifically leaned on the Association of Colleges and Research Libraries' report titled, Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education. ACRL recommends that students exploring these two principles (i.e., information is a process; information has value) should engage in the following practices:

- "articulate the traditional and emerging processes of information creation and dissemination in a particular discipline"
- "articulate the capabilities and constraints of information developed through various creation processes"
- "understand how the commodification of their personal information and online interactions affects the information they receive and the information they produce or disseminate online"
- "make informed choices regarding their online actions in full awareness of issues related to privacy and the commodification of personal information."

My specific CIL outcomes for this assignment/unit were for students to:

- Understand how online data collection actually works: What data are collected, how, and for what purposes?
- Consider the implications of online data collection for consumption, media use, and citizenship
- Engage in activities that deepen these understanding and help students control of their online data/identities

So, before completing the Privacy Paradox challenge week, students completed two readings that explore online data collection for corporate marketing, situate those processes historically, and consider their implications:

- Joseph Turow's (2012) *Atlantic* article, [A guide to the digital advertising industry that's watching your every click](#), explains how "new media marketing" differs from "old media marketing," and it specifically examines the furtive role of "third-party trackers" in the online data collection industry (third party trackers are the specialized companies that gather data *for* the Facebooks, Amazons, and ESPNs of the world).
- The [Introduction](#) to Eli Pariser's (2011) book *The Filter Bubble* then outlines some of the implications of those data collection processes for our news and entertainment experiences -- specifically that our Web experiences are increasingly personalized to reflect what marketers think is "relevant" to us, but not necessarily what we *need* to know or think about.

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[Background](#) - [Syllabus](#) - [Assignment](#) - [Outcomes](#) - [Lab Materials](#) - [Assessment](#) - [Results](#) - [Reflection](#)

Then, in class, we spent a day listening to and discussing [the 22-minute launch episode for *Note to Self's* the Privacy Paradox challenge week](#). In-class discussion revolved around two key ideas from the episode: 1) the distinction between managerial capitalism (e.g., General Electric) and surveillance capitalism (e.g., Google); and 2) the trade-off between privacy and convenience that is at the heart of surveillance capitalism (think: Google Maps -- it's super convenient, but also an extraordinary invasion of privacy).

After listening to the launch episode, we spent the balance of class doing three things: 1) getting students signed up for the Privacy Paradox daily e-mails; 2) explaining to students [the assignment directions](#), particularly my expectation that they listen to each episode, complete the challenge, and journal about their experience; and 3) having students complete the *Note to Self's* [Privacy Personality quiz](#) -- a short quiz that sorts participants into three categories: "Shruggers" (who don't mind online data collection), "Believers" (who care deeply about online privacy), and "Realists" (who see online privacy and convenience as a trade-off). At the end of the challenge week, students would complete a follow-up version of this quiz as a means of seeing how their views changed (NOTE: in future quarters, I will gather these data directly as an additional means of assessing student learning).

Then, over the next week, students listened to each episode of *Note to Self's* the Privacy Paradox and completed the associated challenges. Some students listened to each episode as it arrived in their inbox. Others went directly to *Note to Self's* [the Privacy Paradox website](#) to listen to each episode. Then, after completing each challenge, students answered a short series of questions intended to encourage reflection on what they'd heard and done. Those questions were:

- (Briefly) what did you do for this challenge?
- What did you learn/realize from this experience? What specifically prompted this insight?
- What surprised you -- if anything -- about this experience?
- Do you anticipate changing your media use going forward? If so, how? If not, why?

Since students were responding to each of these questions for all five of the challenge days, the journaling requirement produced more qualitative data than can be summarized here. However, the following comments from student journals illustrate their engagement with the learning outcomes:

SLO1: Understand how online data collection actually works: What data are collected, how, and for what purposes?

- I didn't think that apps that I don't post photos on or use my microphone on would have these on and use them.
- I realized that tracking has gone much more into depth than I really ever thought. Liking things on facebook allows that company to make assumptions about who I am such as my characteristics, and ethnicity.
- The views we hold, the people we surround ourself with, the things we like, and our character traits can all be collected by the simplicity of how one writes.
- I'm going to pay attention to advertisements and see if they have a connection to my recent searches.
- I learned that everything is valuable, like every little information, even if it's not important at all for us, it can be to someone else.

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SLO2: Consider the implications of online data collection for consumption, media use, and citizenship

- It's actually very creepy to me that they were able to figure out so much about my personality just based of my tweets.
- Moving forward, I am intrigued to do a little research. Why are our laws so different from European? It is interesting that Google has to remove items when getting a request if it is no longer relevant to the public. I wonder how they judge the relevance. Why don't we have these laws?
- It was amazing to me how deep advertising and finding out things about people. It is even more complex and in our daily life without any of us knowing about it. Or if we know about it, we just think that it is "normal" for marketing because we, as a public, do not know how marketing is SUPPOSED to work versus how it is working now.
- What most shocked me, was that advertisers can literally chose for certain ethnicities to see the ads. As a Hispanic, I find that extremely offensive because I am probably considered those targeting groups that they assume are poor.
- One thing today's challenge got me to consider more was the importance of technological privacy for vulnerable/marginalized populations. In other words, those with less privilege, whose privacy is more likely to be infringed upon due to their origins, beliefs, or affiliations.

SLO3: Engage in activities that deepen these understanding and help students control of their online data/identities

- This experience has definitely prompted me to change the settings on my computer to protect myself a little better, if that's even possible!
- I really liked this challenge week even though it made me worry a bit, but a good worry because without this I wouldn't have realized how easily someone can access information about me.
- One of the prompts that helped me was to go into your privacy settings and look at what apps use what. I went back through and refined what I wanted some apps to use and what others I did not feel comfortable knowing.
- Listening to this podcast has confirmed suspicions and speculations that I have had about privacy and what companies use our data for. However, what has changed is the depth of what is happening and what I found people are doing to combat it.
- I plan to personally show friends and family exactly what is being taken, even when they did not know it was. And show them the steps I did to keep any information that I can as private as possible.
- I would love to say I will change my media use on this case going forward, but what can you truly change? Anything and everything can be put up on google and no matter what you say or do, you can not take it down.

Ultimately, the Privacy Paradox challenge week proved very productive as a means of deepening student understanding, engagement, and agency with respect to online data collection. The main adjustment I will make next quarter will be to have students answer more specific questions concerning each of the podcast/challenges, rather than having them answer the same questions for each day's activities. I think this will encourage them to think more deeply about the connection between each particular podcast and its associated challenge, and it will help the challenge weeks from becoming stale.