The internet can be a great tool for learning and communication, not to mention fun. However, we have to be careful whenever we use the internet because our privacy can be at risk. As users, we need to be aware that governments and private companies monitor internet users. The American Civil Liberties Union states that social media monitoring software (SMMS) “can be used to covertly monitor, collect, and analyze our social media data from platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram” and it can be used to track us geographically as we communicate (McCullough, May 6, 2016).

**Why are users monitored?**

Governments might monitor users as a way to prevent terrorism and protect their population from people planning criminal activity. Companies might want to monitor users to give them a better experience or to better market goods and services to them. For example, web browsers may display advertising that better fits a user’s recent internet activity. While these may be legitimate reasons for monitoring users, there are risks to society and users when our privacy is threatened. The ACLU warns that people are less likely to share ideas when they think they are being watched, which hurts open discourse (McCullough, May 6, 2016). Even more alarming is the fact that SMMS can also be “aimed at anyone who threatens existing power, whistleblowers, people who have reported misconduct, or someone an agent personally dislikes” (McCullough, May 6, 2016).

**How can users prevent being monitored?**

Anytime you install a new app, sign up for a new website and even boot up a new device, the privacy policy that you read and have to acknowledge usually tells you that your data will be collected and perhaps how it will be used (Nield, January 30, 2018). Here are some ways to limit what is collected:

* Check the security and privacy settings on your devices.
* Turn off cookie tracking in your browser settings
* Install a Virtual Private Network (VPN) to hide your location and encrypt data
* Use a TOR browser.

(Nield, January 30, 2018)

**Can user privacy be accomplished online?**

Although there are some steps you can take to limit the data that is collected about you, you ultimately need to realize that some data will be collected. The ACLU suggests that the best way to prevent being monitored is to make government policy changes that limit surveillance. Specifically, they want to make government agencies use of our data transparent and accountable to the public, so that whatever surveillance is done does not take away our civil liberties and if the rules are broken there would be repercussions (McCullough, May 6, 2016). There is no such thing as online privacy, but we can limit how much information is tracked.

**References**

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