

Personal Data Privacy and Protection in a Surveillance Era: Technologies and Practices

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Personal Data Privacy and Protection in a Surveillance Era: Technologies and Practices is written by Christina Akrivopoulou and Athanasios Psygkas (ed.), and published by IGI Global, © 2011, ISBN13 9781609600839, 402 pp., USD 180.

This book consists of a set of individual papers that discuss topics surrounding the concept of privacy. The introduction sets the stage by stating the dilemma of “how to benefit from the friendly uses of technology without surrendering the individual’s freedom and autonomy”? While this question is not always addressed dead on by the book, it gives a good mind-set for reading.

There are 18 articles in total that address a broad range of topics. Privacy is discussed in settings such as children accessing web sites, closed-circuit television (CCTV) of public spaces for public “safety”, wiretapping, the Internet of Things (RFID tagging in hospitals and of cars), clashes of digital rights management with users’ privacy, and data retention for criminal investigations. I find it refreshing that the book does not focus only on the countries and laws that are usually addressed in privacy discussions – the US and the EU’s Directives – but instead also provides cases and laws from Greece, Turkey, Philippines and Romania.

In the articles’ discussions it becomes apparent that privacy as an absolute goal may not be achievable and needs to be balanced with other considerations. If IP addresses are considered personal data, then tracking down copyright infringements on the Internet is impeded. If there is an opt-in policy in a hospital setting for RFID tagging, it’s tricky to handle it for emergency room procedures. CCTV in public spaces changes the space’s quality for good and for bad.

It’s not readily apparent from the book’s title that almost all articles discuss privacy from the legal perspective. While some articles have more legal emphasis than others, they can be usually understood by non-legal experts. I did like to encounter things I had not heard about before such as the Video Privacy Protection Act that was enacted in response to the release of the video rental history of a Supreme Court candidate. But if you don’t care much about things like HIPPA, EU Directives and subtleties of national laws then this book may not be your best choice.

The strong legal emphasis could also be disappointing for readers looking for a more encompassing treatment of the subject and its interactions with different disciplines/viewpoints such as

sociological, ethical/philosophical, and economical. Also, the book does not cover privacy in social networks or services such as Google Street View, nor does it address contemporary privacy notions such as “publicity”, right to forget, and privacy by design.

A major drawback of the book is that it is no more than a collection of mostly disconnected articles. While this means that individual articles are self-contained, the book is lacking a common terminology and, more importantly, a common (analytical) framework for a more systematic analysis of the discussed privacy issues. As a side note, the disconnected nature of the articles also becomes apparent by the book’s index: its terms do not crosscut articles.

In summary, I would recommend this book to readers who want to explore privacy mostly from the legal perspective with a broad spectrum of topics that crosscut technologies and jurisdictions. You can pick self-contained articles that catch your interest and this way work your way through the book. Conversely, you should not expect a comprehensive and concise treatment – but to my knowledge such a book has not been written yet. If the book’s outrageous price does not cause you grief, it’s a candidate for technical bedside reading. But then, you may also consider turning to authors with more engaging writings like David Friedman, Daniel Solove, Jeff Jarvis and James Whitman.

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