

Cyber Challenges to International Human Rights

Title: Privacy and the Defense of the Self

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Abstract:

I intend to offer a novel understanding of privacy, based on the thought of George Herbert Mead. According to Mead, our self-understanding arises out of our interactions with others around us. In each social relation we have, we assume and maintain a different “social self”. The communicative interaction we have with other individuals shapes and results in the multitude of selves each one of us holds. Thus, one’s self as a spouse differs from one’s self as a boss, colleague, mother, etc. In each of these social interactions, we maintain a somewhat different self.

On this understanding, I define the right to privacy as the right of a person to maintain different, distinct, and unique selves, changing across varying settings and different social relations.

Hence, while some view privacy as a kind of property right, having to do with ownership and the security of body or property, I argue that we should consider the right to privacy as a defense against even more fundamental harm. A violation of one’s privacy, I contend, is not merely a trespass but an actual harm to the very core of what makes us human – our personal identity.

With the advent of ICTs, the dynamic shaping of social selves has risen exponentially. Social networks in particular, engage individuals in ways which allow for an unprecedented degree of freedom and ease in the construction of self-identity. Hence, in a world in which a major part of our life is spent online, the defense of privacy is even more crucial than previously thought.