



Information and Privacy
Commissioner/Ontario
Commissaire à l'information
et à la protection de la vie privée/Ontario

News Release

January 25, 2012

It's NOT "just a number!" Commissioner Cavoukian warns of the ease of data linkages in an increasingly online world

TORONTO, Jan. 25, 2012 – Ontario's Information and Privacy Commissioner, Dr. Ann Cavoukian, says that people's perceptions of their privacy and anonymity online fall far short of reality. In fact, technology has evolved to the point that the seemingly unrelated pieces of information that people share about themselves online, may now be linked together, to create a detailed profile of an individual.

"We have reached a point where information - not only strongly-identifiable Social Insurance Numbers, but also IP addresses, licence plate numbers, and mobile devices - serve as pointers to personally-identifiable information, through an ever-expanding web of data linkages. This bears little resemblance to anonymous information," the Commissioner said.

New analytic tools and algorithms now make it possible - not only to link numbers to names - but to also combine information from multiple sources, ultimately creating an accurate profile of a personally-identifiable individual - and in the process, to reveal their online activities.

"Imagine a scenario where your 'anonymous' comments on a newspaper website or in an online chat forum, could be tracked back to you personally, simply by linking your IP address and browser data across multiple platforms," the Commissioner said.

The Commissioner's advice to consumers: As people share more and more personal information about themselves in new ways (such as personal blogs and social networking sites), they need to consider the nature of the information they share, and how their personal information might be used.

At the same time, she urges organizations that collect and use this data to offer consumers a clear, easy-to-use mechanism to opt out of the collection and use of their personal information. Better still - make privacy the default setting.

The Commissioner's comments come in advance of International Data Privacy Day, January 28, which promotes awareness and education about privacy and best practices relating to data protection.

To commemorate International Privacy Day, the Commissioner is holding a public Symposium on Friday January 27, *Beware of "Surveillance by Design:" Standing Up for Freedom and Privacy*, where highly-respected thought leaders will discuss the privacy implications of proposed federal bills providing police with "lawful access" to individuals' telecommunications. Details can be found at www.realprivacy.ca.



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About the IPC

The Information and Privacy Commissioner is appointed by and reports to the Ontario Legislative Assembly, and is independent of the government of the day. The Commissioner's mandate includes overseeing the access and privacy provisions of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* and the *Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, as well as the *Personal Health Information Protection Act*, which applies to both public and private sector health information custodians. A vital component of the Commissioner's mandate is to help educate the public about access and privacy issues.

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