

UK's Snoopers' Charter Ruled Unlawful: What Does Privacy Mean to You?

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Two weeks ago the [European Court of Human Rights](#) (ECHR) gave a landmark ruling against the UK government's mass surveillance program, stating that it violated human rights and offered "no real safeguards" to the public. This surveillance programme, according to the Strasbourg court, allowed the British intelligence agencies' to violate the right to a private and family life with "insufficient oversight" over which communications were chosen for examination. Of equal importance the ECHR found that the [Investigatory Powers Act](#) (IPA), also known as the Snoopers' Charter, did not give enough protection to journalistic sources which would violate the rights to freedom of expression guaranteed in UK and EU laws and would discourage whistle-blowing. In its [judgment](#) of the case, [Big Brother Watch and Others v. the United Kingdom](#) (applications nos. 58170/13, 62322/14 and 24960/15), the court concluded that police and security services had breached citizens' right to privacy by intercepting communications data in bulk, with little oversight of when these powers could be used, just as NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden had revealed.

In its judgment, the ECHR [expressed concern](#) that "intelligence services can search and examine 'related communications data' apparently without restriction" – data that identifies senders and recipients of communications, their location, email headers, web browsing information, IP addresses, and more." This means that Internet service providers must store details of everything we do online for twelve months and render it accessible to dozens of public bodies to include everything from browsing records to data on private citizens, search engine activity, to every [phone call to text message](#) and geographical location we have held in any of our electronic devices. The IPA also requires that tech companies hand over the data that they possess to intelligence agencies.

Yet, what does this mean for those of us who just use our computers for work and our mobiles for texting friends to meet up for drinks? Surely, this does not affect us, right? Wrong.

The catch is that we are all implicated, to include the simple text message to confirm dinner plans. Do you use a social media account? Do you have photos on your mobile and laptop that you have or have not posted online? Did you rate a restaurant on Google? All this information to include your list of Facebook friends are being mined by the government along with all the tracking information that your many apps provide, your [bank, credit card and financial details](#), biographical information, your [resume](#), your [medical records](#), and all the information in the world that you store on these devices which you might even deem harmless. In this day and age there is no such thing as harmless information. At that, there is no such thing as privacy when the government believes it has already rewritten the IPA in

measure with the [previous court's instruction](#).

As many are concerned with the interception of personal data and parents are reading online privacy and safety guide for kids, the government's secret [interception, processing and storing](#) data of millions of people's private communications, should alarm each and every one of us. The current form of the IPA means that any information that you have in the UK can be shared with secret intelligence agencies like the CIA, and well beyond. With which other countries does the US also share information under similar secret legal frameworks? Also important to consider here are the impediments to tech development that are under threat such as when then [Prime Minister David Cameron](#) threatened to ban Snapchat, WhatsApp, and any other encrypted messaging services unless these companies provided the government with backdoor access to user data. Such measures actually deter technology since most tech companies are aware that the minute they undermine their users' privacy, their company will not last.

In short, by stripping away our privacy, the government is undermining everything that keeps us free: our expression, our right to protest and to fair trials, our legal and patient confidentiality, our free press. And one can argue our individuality is at stake whereby everything we do, consume, record, and say is potentially up for monitoring and scrutiny, as are those with whom we interact. As [Edward Snowden](#) stated, "Because privacy isn't about something to hide. Privacy is about something to protect. That's who you are."

We need to prize our privacy and human right not to be spied upon in this day and age where governments are pulling out the "terrorism" card in order to goad its citizens into surrendering one of the qualities which makes us most human.

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