

# Privacy: Right to be let alone is threatened

Remember those days when we citizens knew our Social Security number was forbidden to be used by anyone except



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GUEST OPINION

the payroll department at our place of employment and the tax authorities? Remember when payroll personnel could exchange this identifier only with

the Social Security Administration, the Internal Revenue Service and ourselves?

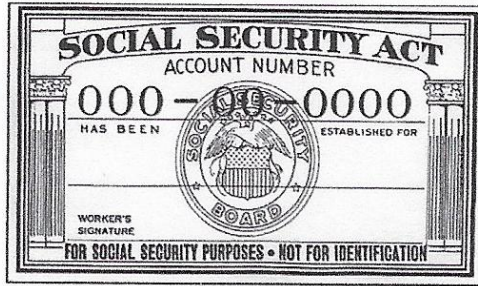
The Social Security card we carried around in our wallets or purses stipulated the number was "not for identification," as shown in the figure.

The upshot of this law was that the SSN was not to be used or recorded by any other enterprise in the United States. Thinking of using it for, say, a job application, a credit card issuance, or a medical ID was not on the horizon.

But times have changed. In some organizations, one must furnish a SSN to gain access to their services. If we do not accept their rules, we must take our business elsewhere.

Fortunately, this practice is changing. But like the illegal immigration fiasco, Uncle Sam's belatedly stepping in to guard against the compromise of the Social Security number reflects actions that should have occurred decades ago. It is akin to closing the gate after the horses are out in the pasture, grazing on heretofore denied grass.

For these times, don't even think about allowing your SSN to be used as an identifier of any kind, especially a password to an online account. Cyber thieves salivate at this prospect. Here are more thoughts



still be an integral part of America's social and political fabric. Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis declared in a 1928 ruling (*Olmstead v. United States*) that the makers of our Constitution conferred the right for United States citizens to be "... let alone — the most comprehensive of rights and the rights valued by civilized man."

Are we being let alone? Is our acceptance to use the internet for our correspondence a declaration that we have forsaken this treasured right? Because the internet's letters (text and emails) are represented electronically and not with pencil or pen, does this change our rights of keeping prying eyes from reading our mail?

I say no, but it seems many people do not care. The former head of a world-dominating internet search engine (Google) claimed we should not be concerned with being exposed if we have nothing we want to conceal. Who on this Earth has nothing he/she does not want exposed, even if it is innocuous? After all, privacy is fundamental to humans' mental inviolability.

A troublesome aspect of internet usage has arisen recently: the display of unsolicited advertisements onto a user's screen. This practice is identical to a stranger breaking into your mailbox, opening one of your envelopes, and writing over the contents of the letter in the envelope. Some of these screens cannot be deleted easily

increasing control of internet users' sessions, data and software by internet vendors.

I have coined the term Internet Oligarchs to identify these organizations. In the future, if present trends continue, they will have the leverage to wield excessive control over users' machines and software — not to mention, users' privacy.

Can this dangerous trend be controlled? Abated? Reversed? If we make our concerns known to Congress, the lawmakers might place boundaries on how much of our lives' privacy become part of a public domain.

That said, I fear Uncle Sam's overreach with its habitual excessive regulations. So our best defense is to be aware of our vulnerability when using the internet, and especially social media. Don't be lazy. For personal matters, use well-tested and easy to implement encryption. If you choose to use social media, a system that puts a premium on user exposure, you've been warned.

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*In the days before the internet, Ulysses was employed by the Federal Reserve Board. One of his software projects was automating the Board's paper-based personnel system. He asked the Board's comptroller for permission to use the SSN with the personnel system. The comptroller's response was a polite but adamant no. The SSN was so private, so treasured, that the issue went all the way to the Board of Governors for resolution.*