The Industrial Revolution changed everything. In a matter of decades, the world was connected, economic productivity skyrocketed, and estimated lifespans improved rapidly. The Information Age is the next great phase in humanity’s cultural evolution. Just like the Industrial Revolution, while the rise of the Information Age will be feared by some for the many problems it will create, overall it will—and already has begun to—change society in positive ways that will far overwhelm the downsides. Thus, personal privacy is not worth the effort for attempting to keep.

First and foremost, as technology develops, it is becoming increasingly clear that it will be next to impossible to successfully regulate the spread of information. Repeatedly in recent history attempts were made to control personal information rights, but the anti-privacy momentum never slowed much. A New York Times article, from 2012, “Justices Say GPS Tracker Violated Privacy Rights”, provides a good example of how futile privacy efforts have become. The article describes the case of a drug dealer who had been tracked by the FBI using a GPS device secretly embedded on his car, which the Supreme Court deemed an unwarranted search. Only three years later, an operating GPS is an expected function of any smartphone, and many third-party applications are given full access to your location at any given time. Even if secretly placing a GPS device on someone else’s car is deemed illegal search, paying any number of private companies for a person’s location is fully legal. In coming years, improvements in smartphone GPS, satellite camera technology, and even self-driving car products will make it impossible to protect the privacy of car drivers’ habits from anyone willing to pay for the information. The increasing difficulty of protecting car data is a microcosm for the
privacy issue as a whole. As Chapter 2 of Blown to Bits explains, “The U.S. is not lacking in privacy laws. But privacy has been legislated inconsistently and confusingly, and in terms dependent on technological contingencies” (65). With so much backlash against privacy laws from government protection agencies, big business, and the masses of perfectly law-abiding citizens, implementing privacy laws that at once stand against technological advancement, do not overly inhibit economic growth, and are agreed upon by a majority is an unachievable goal.

Government agencies, big business and honest citizens have a point in arguing against privacy laws, past their ineffectiveness. The convenience, efficiency and safety that come with publicizing information is overwhelmingly positive. “Student IDs That Track Students,” an article by the New York Times, reflects on how new RFID-enabled student IDs have saved a school district and its students money and time, as well as providing a new safety net in case there is an emergency or missing child. The only dissidents were a few adults, most of whom did not have children in the school. A less benign example are EDRs, the black boxes keeping track of car locations. Some criticize the boxes for being overly watchful, but so far they have only succeeded in improving the traffic system and saving the lives of missing persons. As long as the boxes are used by the government for a good purpose—and the government is supported by the people, so purposes deemed bad would quickly be rectified—they remain a positive addition to the Information Age. Furthermore, with Google proposing to introduce self-driving cars as soon as 2020 according to DailyMail.com, soon enough all information about driving that is not already known through smartphones and EDRs will be analyzed by companies to improve service. Whether society accepts that will be decided by whether the cars are successful. Based on successful car ventures so far, however, like Uber and Lyft, whose convenience and relative cheapness overwhelm the fear of data collection to customers, it seems likely the self-driving cars will succeed. While the behavioral analysis by companies such as these, or
others as large as Target or Amazon, can be unsettling at an individual level, it improves the life of a person in the long run through specialized service and cost-efficiency, and consumers everywhere are accepting the trade-off—if it is even considered a trade-off at all.

While economically and politically, the privacy dissolution is inevitable and long-term is almost a non-issue to either consumer, business or government, the most poignant argument against complete informational awareness has to do with human social environment. A strong argument can be made that once companies like Snapchat, Facebook and Google remove all privacy barriers, people will be afraid to break social norms and be creative. Furthermore, individuals could be harshly punished for mistakes made as adolescents or adults: mistakes that are only human. However, the effect of the information explosion could be exactly the opposite of harsh and stymieing to individuals. Those celebrities and politicians who have been publicly ruined by text messages, Facebook accounts and Google searches have only been adults thus far. As Joseph Lavouie puts it in 680 News, this generation of politicians is the “awkward generation,” because they had social media before realizing the possible long-term ramifications. The 2000s generation, however, is the first to have been born straight into social media and the Information Age. This new generation will probably be smarter about what they do or say that could be made public, but more importantly, will probably be much more forgiving to mistakes, as well. Rather than undercut the next generation, complete informational knowledge could make society more empathetic to human errors, as it will be clear that absolutely no person is perfect, be him a famous politician or a commoner. In terms of creativity, the information revolution could actually further spark social innovation. Rather than being condemned to hide in the shadows, going against the grain would be openly celebrated in the face of constant streams of informational sameness. In the end, the consequences we fear
from loss of privacy may actually prove to be some of the Information Age’s greatest achievements.

Works Cited


