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Redefining privacy in a digital world

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The Latin phrase *ius relinquendum est*, which translates to “the right to be left alone,” encapsulates an ancient concept of privacy that has undergone a dramatic evolution in the digital age. This ancient notion—deeply rooted in the desire for personal space and autonomy—has evolved significantly, especially in the digital age where personal data becomes an extension of self.

As we navigate this era, data privacy and individual identity fusion present new challenges and opportunities for compliance professionals. This article explores how embracing this unique perspective of privacy as an integral part of self can transform compliance strategies, making them more effective and competitive in today’s digital landscape.

The digital self: Understanding data as an extension of identity

Every digital interaction contributes to a rich mosaic that defines our digital identity in today’s interconnected world. This goes beyond mere online presence; it’s a comprehensive digital persona shaped by various online activities. From social media footprints to browsing habits, online purchases to location tracking, each data point we generate becomes a pixel in the broader picture of our digital selves. This interconnectedness of personal data and identity is profound, marking a shift in how we perceive privacy. It’s no longer just about safeguarding information but protecting an integral part of who we are. Recent statistics underscore this reality: a report by DataReportal in 2023 indicated that the average person spends nearly seven hours online daily, generating enormous volumes of data contributing to their digital identity.^[1]

The proliferation of smart devices and Internet of Things technology has further entrenched this concept. According to data by Parks Associated, there was an average of 17 connected devices per household in the U.S in 2023.^[2] These devices, ranging from smartphones to smart home technologies, constantly gather, store, and transmit data, weaving an ever-expanding digital fabric of our personal lives. This relentless data generation is not just a passive occurrence but actively shapes how businesses, governments, and society perceive and interact with us. It underlines compliance professionals’ importance in protecting this data and understanding its broader implications on individual autonomy and rights.

In this context, data privacy becomes more than a compliance requirement; it’s fundamental to preserving the digital human condition in the 21st century.

The privacy paradox and the control dilemma

In this digital landscape, users frequently exchange their personal information for convenience or access to free

services. This transaction often occurs without a complete understanding of its implications, leading to a critical question: How much control do individuals have over their data and, consequently, their digital selves? In reality, individuals' control over their personal data could be better.

The complexity and opacity of data collection practices by various online platforms and services can obscure the extent to which personal information is harvested and used. Terms of service agreements—often lengthy and filled with legal jargon—are routinely accepted without thorough reading, inadvertently granting broad permissions to collect and use personal data. The rise of technologies like artificial intelligence and machine learning has deepened this paradox.

These technologies can analyze vast amounts of personal data, creating detailed profiles that can predict behavior and preferences. While this can lead to enhanced user experiences, it also raises concerns about privacy, autonomy, and the potential misuse of such profiles.

Additionally, the digital divide exacerbates this issue of control. Only some have equal access to resources, knowledge, or tools to protect online privacy. Those less digitally literate may find it challenging to navigate privacy settings or understand the implications of data sharing, resulting in a disproportionate impact on their privacy and autonomy.

As we consider the profound ways in which personal data has become an extension of our digital selves, it becomes increasingly clear that the impact of technology on privacy rights cannot be overstated. The advancement of technology has not only expanded the scope of data collection but has also introduced complex challenges in how this data is used, shared, and protected. The ensuing case studies offer a window into the real-world implications of these technological advancements, illustrating the potential risks to privacy and the crucial role that compliance professionals play in safeguarding these rights. These examples highlight the necessity for a proactive and informed approach to compliance, adaptable to the rapid pace of technological change and sensitive to the intricate relationship between personal data and individual privacy.

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