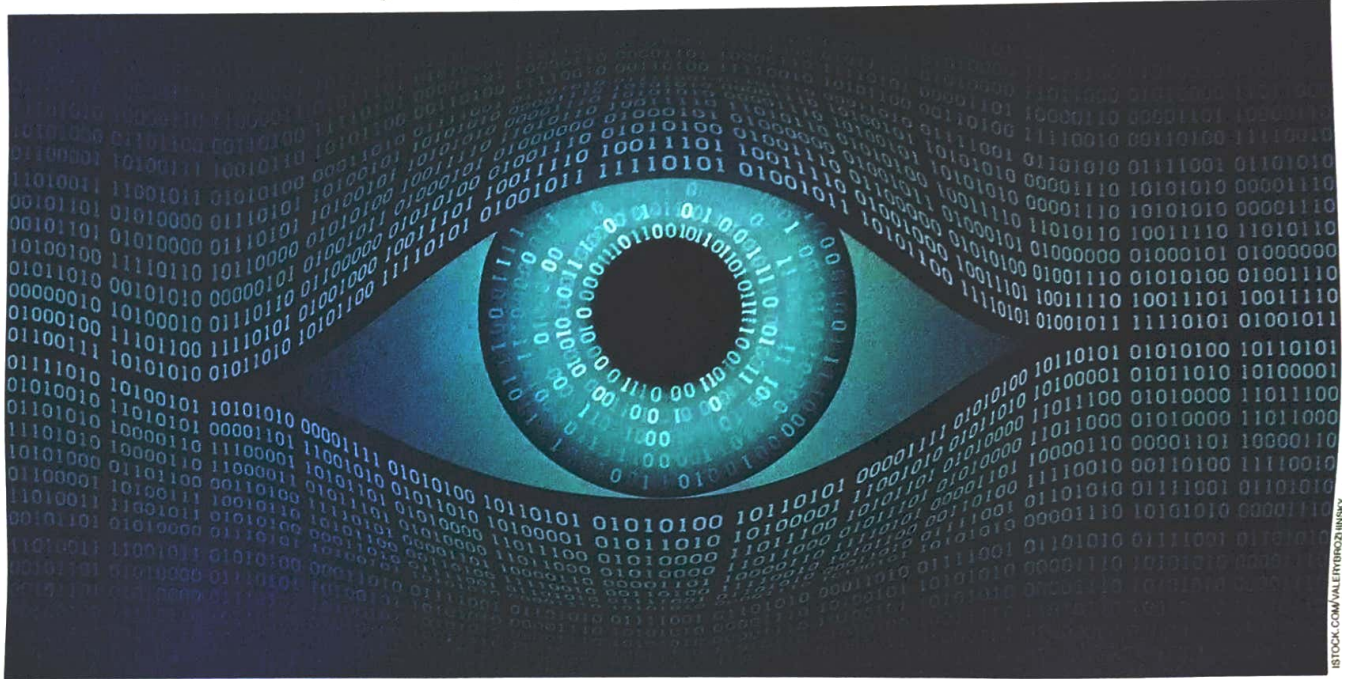


There's a ghost in my machine

Don't just play with new gadgetry; stay updated and take control of your digital life, says **Mathures Paul**



The US Department of Homeland Security recently intensified its efforts to identify Americans who oppose Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). It sent legal requests to tech companies for the names and details of social media accounts that track or criticise the agency.

Last December, Hong Kong national security police arrested a 71-year-old man, accusing him of publishing videos with "seditious intention" online and inciting hatred of the government. The videos were about an apartment complex fire that killed 168 people.

Closer home, last week police registered a case against a man in Sreekandapuram in Kerala for allegedly calling Prime Minister Narendra Modi a "traitor" in a social media post.

As privacy rights are eroded, we start to live more and more of our lives in public. In his 1920s dystopian novel *We*, Yevgeny Zamyatin takes the reader to an authoritarian society called the One State, which is governed by technological efficiency and the enforced suppression of individual identity. "We live behind our transparent walls that seem woven of gleaming air — we are always visible, always washed in light. We have nothing to conceal from one another," he writes.

We put cameras inside our homes by choice. We carry around smartphones that track our movements and allow us to record anyone. As we walk around in public, we know we are being watched not just by other people but by cameras installed in every other building. And whenever you talk about privacy, someone inevitably asks: "What do you have to hide?"

We are followed 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. By our phones and laptops, smart watches and AI toys. How many of us check the settings on the smartphone to the last t? Do you use a VPN? Do you carefully read the terms and conditions before clicking the accept button of an app? While you are not doing one or more of these, your private information is being raided, traded and used against you in many ways.

For a long time, advertising was an art of guesswork. Admen, making a TV commercial for beer, could only hope that you were thirsty. Now,

they can tell exactly how thirsty you are. Lowry Pressly's book *The Right to Oblivion: Privacy and the Good Life* sheds light on an era of surveillance that has become so commonplace that many people might not even recognise it as such. He writes: "Employers track their employees' keystrokes and Internet usage. Teachers monitor their students' eye movements."

Pressly bats for privacy or what he calls "oblivion". Privacy is about living meaningful lives and allowing people to build trust with one another. Yet we live in a world that hates privacy.

Mark Zuckerberg told a live audience in 2010, "People have really gotten comfortable not only sharing more information and different kinds, but more openly and with more people. That social norm is just something that has evolved over time."

Whether they have gotten more comfortable or have completely given up is another question.

Almost every corporation you interact with online is trying to collect personal data. If they know more about you, it's easier for them to sell you things.

How do they do it? Tiny trackers are downloaded to your computer that collect details such as your IP address, the device you are using, your screen size and even your rough location.

These trackers follow you as you move from one website to another. They take your private data — like basic identifiers, purchase history, health data and behavioural data — and send it to advertising companies.

This creates a vast digital marketplace where personal information is up for grabs. Think of it as the Maniktala fish market. Your data is like *ilish*, *padma* or *bhetki*, except instead of humans arguing over the price, algorithms are doing all the talking. It all happens in a split second, every time you load a web page.

Companies claim this data is scattered into too many little pieces and therefore remains anonymous. However, by buying and selling to each other, these corporations can reassemble those pieces and build complete profiles of you. Any social media platform would like to know

more about you — your favourite movies, albums, books and hobbies — and they even encourage you to join groups or pages relevant to your interests. It is all done in the name of building social connections.

Companies have all of this information about you, and they have it legally.

Being tracked by a beverage company is one thing, but what about the public webcams and people wearing smart glasses?

A 2022 study by the UK-based research firm Comparitech placed India near the bottom of its rankings on how a state protects the privacy rights of its citizens. The only two countries behind us are China and Russia.

In 2025 December, the Centre was forced to withdraw its order directing smartphone manufacturers to mandatorily pre-install the government-developed Sanchar Saathi cybersecurity app on handsets. This was a result of pressure from the Opposition, who saw it as a snooping tool, and widespread concern about a possible invasion of privacy.

The issue of privacy goes beyond Sanchar Saathi. While we worry about artificial intelligence one day coming for our jobs, AI is already influencing the workplace through "bossware" — a term popularised by the Electronic Frontier Foundation. This technology allows managers to supervise employees in real-time.

People in power want you to believe that your privacy is something you must compromise to stay safe. But living online lives, we have become the sum of what we have searched, clicked, liked and purchased.

However, we are not entirely powerless. While there is no longer such a thing as being truly "let alone", we can still assert control over our digital footprints. By using privacy-focused browsers, managing app permissions more strictly and demanding stronger data legislation, we can start to recalibrate the power balance.

The first step is to pay attention.

Beginning March 23, Knowhow will feature a column, AI & You