



Last Words



Michael Martineau

Michael Martineau is a Director of the Branham Group in Ottawa

Is Anyone Watching Big Brother?

At the risk of using this column to confess all my sins, weaknesses, and vices, I will admit that in addition to being a geek, I am also a television junkie.

One show that I like to watch is “Grey’s Anatomy”, the on-going saga of a group of surgical interns working at a Seattle hospital. In nearly every episode the interns actively seek out the most bizarre and medically obscure cases and rush to get a first hand look at the patient. Each and every time I watch the interns gawk at some poor patient’s misfortune I am struck with a sense of horror at the blatant invasion of privacy.

Does this situation happen in the “real world”? I certainly hope not. Yet, judging by the concerns that I hear raised on nearly a daily basis, there is considerable trepidation about the potential loss of privacy in our increasingly digital world, particularly when it comes to our medical information.

What exactly are these concerns? A humorous look at this very serious matter can be found at: www.adcritic.com/interactive/view.php?id=5927

In this imaginary scenario, a man attempting to order a pizza is faced with surcharges based on information contained in his electronic health record. Knowing that he has high cholesterol, his insurance company will levy a hefty fee if he orders a “meat lovers” pizza.

While I probably should have taken more notice of the privacy concerns raised by this hypothetical situation, I was more intrigued by the significant level of integration that adcritic envisages. I cannot help but think of the many painful interactions that I have endured when attempting to contact a “help” desk for technical support. I cannot begin to count the number of times, on the same call, that I am asked for my phone number. Haven’t these people heard of caller ID? Can’t they transfer information already gathered from one operator to the next?

Are concerns about loss of privacy when it comes to our medical records valid? Well, if the examples that make the news from time to time are any indication, it would appear that they might be. In Ottawa last summer, medically sensitive information was found in garbage bags by the side of the road for pickup. Whether by accident or on purpose, medical waste containing

patient information had been placed in the regular garbage rather than special containers.

Bearing in mind the adage that “To err is human, to really screw up takes a computer”, our concerns about accidental and malicious disclosure of medical information take on greater magnitude as we implement electronic health record systems. Witness the accidental release of patient information when supposedly “blank” computer tapes sold at surplus auction were found to contain personal medical records.

Of greater concern to many people is the deliberate use of what is felt to be private information for purposes that may not be in their best interest. Numerous books and movies have explored this topic including George Orwell’s “1984” and the Tom Cruise movie “Minority Report”. Indeed, the phrase “Big Brother” has become synonymous with our concerns about government watching our every move and is often used to represent the dark side of Information Technology.

I’m a “glass half-full” kind of guy. While I do recognize that potentially damaging negative impact on my privacy, I feel that there is a much greater potential for Information Technology to offer enhanced protection of our personal information. Although it is nearly impossible to determine who has looked at my paper records and for what purpose, it is possible, with the appropriate security software in place, to more carefully control who looks at my personal information and to track each and every attempt to do so.

While I am clearly an optimist when it comes to the potential for Information Technology to protect my privacy, I applaud the efforts of individuals and organizations who point out the potential dangers and who alert us to actual privacy violations. Their efforts keep this critical matter at the forefront of our policy debates and contribute to the development of legislation, regulations and policies that drive the development and deployment of sophisticated privacy and security software.

Do you share my views that we can enhance our privacy through the appropriate use of Information Technology or are we destined to have the fast food cashier ask “Do you think that you REALLY NEED to have fries with that?” email me at mmartineau@branhamgroup.com to share your views. ●