

The emerging challenges to the right to privacy: a new EU funded project to reconceptualize the issue

Emerging technologies offer significant benefits but also risks to our privacy. How to deal with these risks is the subject of a new three-year project funded by the European Commission.

Called PRESCIENT, the project will be considering the privacy implications of emerging technologies such as new identification and surveillance technologies, biometrics, on-the-spot DNA sequencing and technologies for human enhancement.

"New technologies can often be used in a way that undermines the right to privacy because they facilitate the collection, storage, processing and combination of personal data by security agencies and businesses," says Michael Friedewald, head of the ICT research unit at the Fraunhofer Institute for Systems and Innovation Research (ISI) and co-ordinator of the project. "We have seen that with the rise of social networking websites such as Facebook, MySpace and Bebo. They have led to a dramatic increase in the amount of personal information available online, which is routinely misappropriated for identity theft or other fraudulent purposes. We know that employers also mine these sites in order to vet prospective employees. RFID and biometrics can also be used in ways invidious to our privacy."

"The use of these new technologies is changing the ways in which we understand privacy and data protection. It is not sufficient to look at privacy as only a legal or human right. We need to reconceptualise privacy in ethical, social, cultural and other dimensions and to see how these different conceptualisations impact each other and how they can be bridged. We think part of the solution is much wider use of privacy and ethical impact assessments before new technologies or projects involving personal data are undertaken."

PRESCIENT is the acronym for Privacy and Emerging Sciences and Technologies. The project aims to establish a new framework for privacy and ethical considerations arising from emerging technologies

The project will identify and analyse ethical issues posed by new technologies and discuss them with interested stakeholders and, in due course, provide scientifically based recommendations to policy makers on how to address privacy issues of emerging technologies.

The PRESCIENT project is being undertaken by a consortium of four partners. In addition to Fraunhofer ISI in Germany, the other partners are Trilateral Research & Consulting (UK), the Centre for Science, Society and Citizenship (Italy) and the research centre Law, Science, Technology & Society at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium).

More details about the project are available at <http://www.prescient-project.eu> or from Michael.Friedewald@isi.fraunhofer.de