Column: Privacy vs. freedom vs. security: Which is most important online?

By Bob Zaltsberg 331-4364 | rzaltsberg@heraldt.com
February 27, 2012

A person is arrested on a felony charge related to an incident police believe was domestic battery.

The case goes to the prosecutor’s office for review, and the charge is reduced to a misdemeanor. Months later, the case is dismissed because the person believed to be the victim does not want to pursue the matter.

That scenario describes cases that occasionally occur, not just in Monroe County, but throughout the nation.

If it had happened in Bloomington, our newspaper routinely would publish the arrest in our “Police Beat” column.

Five years later, the person originally arrested could be searching for his own name on Google and the arrest would pop up. The story’s still true — he was arrested on that specific charge five years ago. The dismissal information might even accompany the story. But should the fact of the arrest be available for anyone to find, including a prospective employer or someone he just started dating? Is this a privacy issue? Would it be more fair to hide it away? Better for whom?

A situation like that is fairly common, and was one of the topics brought up at a panel last weekend on the Indiana University campus. The 90-minute panel discussion was part of a day-long forum called “Internet & Society: Privacy, Freedom and Security” put on by students from the PACE program (PACE stands for Political and Civic Engagement.)

Fred Cate, an IU law professor, and Chase Whiteside, a 24-year-old documentary filmmaker and co-founder of New Left Media, were my partners on the panel.

Whiteside, an emerging and articulate voice for social change from his generation, rejected the piracy regulations discussed recently in Congress and advocated strongly for a free and open Internet. He also noted that the people in charge of making decisions about governing the Internet don’t understand the technology or the issues.
Cate, one of the nation’s leading cyber security experts, warned of the dangers associated with the new technology, in which individuals freely and often without thinking give away private information that can be used against them in a myriad of ways.

“They’re not only going to know more about you than you know about yourself, they’re going to predict more about you than you can possibly predict about yourself,” he said.

As a representative of what Whiteside called the “old media conglomerate,” I focused my remarks on how the Internet has changed the game for newspapers; how information online is abundant but often unreliable; how government regulation over the availability of information would set a bad precedent by weakening the citizenry and further empowering the government; and how anonymity on the Internet leads to incivility.

Panelists covered and illustrated the crux of critical debate about the Internet, as outlined by a National Issues Forum booklet that helped introduce the discussion. Those books set out these positions: protect individual privacy, promote freedom of speech and commerce or secure us from online threats.

Think about how those core positions overlap where the Internet is concerned. Pursuing one of those themes 100 percent could easily infringe on the other two. Which core position would you advocate? What compromises would you be willing to make?

The panel raised the questions. Answers are harder to come by.

**What about pay walls?**

The last question asked by a student was: What do you think of pay walls? The H-T, I explained, has charged for content for about nine years, and we still maintain it is the best business model for us, whether or not it works for anyone else. But I noted that newspaper companies, including the New York Times, more and more are deciding to charge for their content.

Four days after the panel, the huge communications company Gannett announced its newspapers would begin charging for content. In Indiana, that means the Indianapolis Star as well as papers in Muncie, Lafayette and Richmond.