



University of Ottawa professor Ian Kerr, a Calgary native, is leading a multi-discipline team studying the murky issue of privacy and whether it is deteriorating in the digital age.

Erin Smith, for the Calgary Herald

TAMARA GIGNAC  
CALGARY HERALD

At the Baja Beach Club — one of the hottest nightclubs in Barcelona — patrons pay for cocktails with a simple flash of their arm.

Revelers who want to dodge lineups and enjoy VIP treatment are injected with a microchip giving instant entry to the bar. Short on cash? No problem — the glass capsule also acts as a payment system when waved beneath an electronic reader.

The Orwellian technology — about the size of a grain of rice — uses radio frequency identification (RFID) tags, similar to inventory tracking devices used by Wal-Mart and other retailers.

Critics argue the implanted chips are turning people into human bar codes with little control over their personal information and who it is shared with.

But proponents of RFID tags say the technology has life-saving purposes. An emergency room doctor, for example, could instantly access a patient's health-care records, allergy information or previous surgeries if a chip were embedded in the body.

There's also growing interest in using implanted chips to help parents keep track of their children within the confines of an amusement park, a shopping mall or even a school

campus.

As the distinction between man and machine increasingly blurs, it poses an intriguing question: Will anonymity become a relic of the past?

The murky issue of privacy — and whether it is deteriorating in the digital age — is the subject of a \$4 million research initiative, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research of Council of Canada and corporate partners.

Leading a multi-disciplinary team of 23 scientists, ethicists, philosophers, lawyers, CEOs and engineers is University of Ottawa professor Ian Kerr, a Calgary native and currently a

# Is privacy a thing of the past?

New  
identification  
technology  
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anonymity

distinguished visiting scholar at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona.

"The ground is shifting under our feet: we're moving from a world where anonymity was our default position, to a world where that's no longer the case," said Kerr.

"There is a recognition — if not a growing concern — that technology if used improperly has the power to undermine a bedrock set of values."

Since 1890 — when the arrival of the camera prompted the Harvard Law Review to question the feasibility of anonymity — scholars and theorists have debated the no-

tion of privacy.

But rather than dismiss all technology as worrisome — whether it be implantable chips or airport biometric scanners — Kerr is exploring ways to use the same technology to bolster anonymity.

"I think it's wrong for anybody who's a privacy advocate to be a Luddite, and certainly our team is quite the opposite," said Kerr. "At the same time, one has to be careful about putting too much faith in technology as the only answer to enhancing privacy."

Online voting — trumpeted as a means to improve voter turnout — offers a thorny example of the difficulty striking a balance between too much surveillance and not enough, said Kerr.

"A person's name can't be attached to their ballot, but there also has to be a means to authenticate their identity to ensure they are eligible to vote, or haven't voted twice."

Working with Kerr on the project is Marsha Hanen, president of the Calgary-based Sheldon Chumir Foundation for Ethics in Leadership and adjunct professor of philosophy at the University of Victoria.

She is interested in exploring the relationship between privacy and security — and whether a balance can be struck between the two.

"I don't for a moment think there aren't security issues that require our attention. But I think the real question is how

much? Do we simply accept everything that's told to us, or do we ask questions?" said Hanen.

Whether it be cookies — tiny computer programs that sit quietly in a user's web browser, recording snippets of information — or other intrusive software, the digital age has ushered in a new era of privacy debate.

Google found itself under attack from consumer watchdogs recently, after the popular search engine said it planned to look at users' e-mail messages so it could distribute relevant advertisements.

The company — in portraying the service as a minor inconvenience for access to one gigabyte of storage — raised the ire of critics.

"Consumers really need to look this gift horse in the mouth, because it has rotten teeth and bad breath," Beth Givens, director of the U.S.-based Privacy Rights Clearinghouse, told the Associated Press recently.

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BETH GIVENS,  
PRIVACY RIGHTS  
CLEARING HOUSE



Calgary Herald Archive

Privacy expert Ian Kerr is exploring ways to use invasive technology to bolster anonymity.

## FROM FI

# PRIVACY: Swaying public policy toward ethical means

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UNIVERSITY OF  
OTTAWA  
PROFESSOR  
IAN KERR

The issue over whether Internet service providers should be legally forced to turn over the names of alleged music pirates has sparked concern that privacy on the web is eroding, said Kerr.

“Imagine a situation where a whistle-blower is using a pseudonym to speak out online about corporate misdeeds. You can see why there are reasons to think about how far we should go to protect anonymity, and where the limits are.”

By 2006, Wal-Mart plans

to use RFID technology to track all shipments through its supply chain. Other firms — including the Gap and U.K. supermarket Tesco — are testing chips that can alert employees if an item is being stolen.

In an interesting twist, rifle maker FN Manufacturing also plans to use the technology to make “smart guns” that can only be fired by their owners. The guns, which should become commercially available next year, will have a chip reader built into the handle and the gun owner will have a

chip implanted in his or her head.

The technology worries privacy advocates, who fear RFID could one day track people for intelligence purposes, or become sinister tools for dictatorial regimes.

The ultimate test of any democracy is the extent to which it protects the basic liberties of its citizens, Kerr believes. His research team hopes to investigate how technology can improve the quality of society without being invasive — and ultimately influence law-

makers and sway public policies toward ethical approaches.

“I'm not so worried about someone having the omnipotent ability to track my every move and every breath,” said Kerr. “But the reality is, we're moving to a place where we have less control over our information, forcing us to rely on someone's goodwill to ensure that our privacy is maintained.”

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