



Why Reasonable Fear is a Good Thing (at Least Some of the Time)

Analyst: Mike Kahn

Paranoia has several definitions. One is medical, focusing on unrealistic delusions that someone or something is out to harm the one harboring the beliefs. Another is more subtle, maybe a little less clinical, and probably much more common. This is a belief, sometimes excessive, that one needs to be suspicious of the motives of others. As President Franklin Roosevelt famously said, "...the only thing we have to fear is fear itself..." That was a knowing statement for him personally (as he fought paralytic illness from middle age), but it also was well put for the times (World War II).

Fear of fear likely will be irrational and debilitating. Fear of something more real or more likely to occur is something different, but I am getting ahead of myself. While paranoia runs a gamut across a broad spectrum of concerns, **sometimes fear may be realistic (i.e., grounded in reality)**. Whether you perceive the warning signs and yet choose to ignore or minimize them, or whether you just are oblivious to them, is key to understanding your situation and response.

Last week Google announced its Google Drive, with 5TBs of storage in the cloud for the asking. More than any time in the recent past, the question of what Google can do and might do with your data has been raised to the front pages. While Google's new data use policy recently has been in the news, only now is this becoming a topic of general discussion. The concern is not just about Google, but Google is so familiar and so intertwined with so many of us that it has become the poster child for our privacy concerns.

I am not a social scientist but I believe that most folks fall into one of two camps regarding their concern about fear in the 21st century cyberspace. Some are concerned, to varying degrees, and some are much less concerned or not concerned at all. One more example of "the haves" and "the have nots". *About what am I speaking?*

I am one of the concerned. You might say, accurately, that I have been concerned for a very long while, maybe even my whole adult life. Back in the early 1980s, I became genuinely concerned about the rampant use of Social Security Numbers as a universal identifier. With a strong background in computer science, I recognized the value of a unique identifier. It made programming and relational joins so much easier. Unfortunately, my concern turned out to be well founded, as my identity was stolen more than a decade ago, and it involved my Social Security Number. I don't think that I am delusional but quite rational in my concern for where information about me is kept and shared. Maybe, this is something that comes with age or maybe it is something that goes back to an earlier time, when being noticeable (i.e., standing out) in a crowd was a reasonable fear. Regardless, **today there are many to whom privacy is (or should be) an important concern.**

However, I feel safe in saying that there are many more to whom this is not a concern nor a significant enough of a concern to avoid exposure and its potential, probabilistic risks. Maybe, this is a generational thing. The younger you are, the less concerned you seem to be. While this is not universally true, it seems to be generally true. *Why is this so?* Let me hypothecate three reasons.

First, it is much easier to share **information than not to share**; thus, it is easier to be not concerned (or less concerned) than it is to be concerned. We can thank the Internet and social media sites, among many others.

Second, it seems to be cheaper to share than not to share. On the Internet, we seem to get a lot for no hard cash. Thus, a lot seems to be offered for little in return. However, as we all know, there is no free lunch. Somebody has to pay and that somebody has to have a motive for paying (usually an expected Return on Investment (ROI)). With Google, they clearly provide much of value; all they ask in return is the right to mine and use what you share with them, whether intentionally or more subtly.

Is this is a Faustian bargain? I guess it all depends on whom you ask. Those who are informationally paranoid, like me, would say this it is no bargain. You are giving up something valuable (and potentially very valuable) in exchange for something akin to beads and trinkets.

Whoa, I hear you saying: *Who am I to place that high value on someone else's personal information, maybe someone who is of much lesser means than me?* (The value of the bargain may be perceived differently as one's discretionary funds increase, as I might not want to trade my personal information for something that I can afford to buy more readily, but someone of lesser means might have no other means by which to achieve one's objectives.) *Additionally, who am I to value what is received in return as being of low value?* These all are very fair questions. Here's my answer. Because I am overly concerned (for good reasons, I think), it seems reasonable to me to share my concerns with others. I am, by the way, an analyst and author, and sharing my thoughts is what I do for a living. Fair enough, I hope you are thinking.

But, the skeptics among you might ask: *Am I being elitist? Am I being anti-social?* "Maybe", no make that "probably", for both questions. I am well off by many measures, a product of more than four decades of hard work. I'm not in the 1%, but I am better off than most. I can afford to pay for more "services" than most people half my age. That may qualify me as being an elitist.

What about anti-social? I am not against being in the public eye. Anybody who wants to find me can find me at clipper.com. I am not against networking for business purposes. My business depends on that, but I am selective. When it comes to my personal life, I still am more than a little concerned, however. You won't find me gabbing away online or displaying my latest vacation for all to see. Am I anti-social? I would say "no". I would call myself "selectively social", make that "very selectively social". I guess I care less about the consequences of being this way than many do.

Maybe if I grew up with social media and the Internet since birth, I would see it as a social necessity. At this later stage of my life (I am a Baby Boomer, if you haven't figured it out), I value my reasonable privacy concerns more than I value my social-networking possibilities. It's a luxury that I think that I can afford.

Third, and very important to acknowledge, sharing can be fun, entertaining, and satisfying of personal objectives. Also, it tends to be so very seductive. That's the magic of all of this. It's like putting a big bowl of your favorite candy or snack in front of you and saying, "Eat all you want, just ignore the fine print." The calories that you are consuming are only a few per bite and won't be a problem for years to come...enjoy it now and worry about it later. As Alfred E. Neuman (the fictional mascot and cover boy of *Mad Magazine* fame) so succinctly put it: *What Me Worry?* I disagree. More than a little concern often is well founded.

Why am I saying all of this? What does this have to do with Enterprise IT, my primary beat? It is because there is an important adjacent set of concerns. While so far I have expressed my concerns in personal terms, enterprises (and SMBs, government agencies, and other organizations) have even greater reasons to be concerned – much more than a little.

How I choose to live, represent and even publicize my private life, that is something that I can choose to do for myself. (Although some of the dumb things done by people supposedly in positions of responsibility and trust can and will reflect back on their organizations, including employers, with whom they are associated...just read the recent headlines regarding the Secret Service.) Nonetheless, if I want to take some risk in exchange for some apparent personal reward, that reflects only (or mostly) on me.

However, if I have greater responsibilities, say for enterprise information, then how the enterprise protects and shares its information reflects on the whole enterprise. There can be public relations ramifications of mishandling information – think about disclosing unsavory inside information from emails. There can be monetary ramifications – exposing a million customers' credit information will cost a bundle to mitigate and litigate. There can be legal and governance ramifications – you can go to jail for disclosing protected information and there can be national security consequences.

So, I guess my question to you is “Should enterprise executives and board members (in general) and IT executives and managers (in particular) be more than a little concerned about the risks they, as a business, are taking with enterprise information?” Restated: **“Does a little (or more) informational paranoia now seem reasonable?”**

I hope that you are nodding your head in acknowledgement, even if just a little. When it comes to enterprise IT, protection and service are the two most important parameters. Before you can serve, you need to think about how safely you can serve. This is not an either/or situation. IT is both the conduit and the cop.

What am I suggesting? Don't ignore the risks to your business of your intentional and unintentional data policies. Go forward with a healthy dose of concern, as it is justified. Easier is not always better. Following conventional wisdom (sometimes called “usual or standard practices”) is not always the right thing to do. There likely is a dark shadow lurking around the corner. The problem now is that there are so many corners on the Internet. Here's some advice.

- **Use reasonable fear as a traveling companion for moving forward.**
- **Question the obvious.**
- **Question all solutions and promises with the same degree of concern.**
- **Question the potential rewards that your business will get from the risks that you are recommending, whether directly or in your silence.**
- **Question whether enough has been done to mitigate the well-reasoned risks.**
- **Question whether IT solutions truly are “good enough”.**
- **Go forward into the darkness with a bright light and eyes wide open and, as President Teddy Roosevelt suggested, you'd better carry a big stick!**



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