

While best known as a freedom of information advocate, Ken Rubin has, for over five decades, been active in investigating the ever-changing face of privacy abuse and ways forward for better privacy protection. While invasive technology has upped the ante, the basic privacy problems remain and have increased in intensity.

I was told as a kid, not everything is public and soon observed, not everyone wants to respect what individuals want kept private. By the nineteen-seventies, I was already active in many community campaigns and took up the cause of wanting better privacy protection by chairing the information rights committee of the National Capital Civil Liberties Association in Ottawa.

There, we fought to prevent and change the increasing linkage of Canadians' social insurance numbers as a national ID, making submissions to parliament and the first Canadian privacy commissioner. I coordinated the writing and publication of their widely distributed handbook, "Privacy and You" that indicated Canadians should not randomly give out such private information.

Working as well with the Canadian Federation of Civil Liberties and Human Rights Associations, I undertook an action research project ("How Private is Private") that tested the effectiveness of early privacy legislation, looking at what the federal government had on me, including it turned out getting someone else's files. That study went viral in an age before social media.

By the nineteen-eighties, along with the local and national civil liberty group, I pushed for better privacy protection legislation. I produced a research paper on improving privacy legislation ("Suggested Changes to Canada's 1982 Privacy Act") and another paper, after that enactment clearly fell short, warning of the privacy invasion threats embedded in the public-sector privacy legislation ("Prying Eyes").

I also organized various privacy seminars like one for the Science Council of Canada and took part in privacy conferences, including an international Montreal conference. I wrote, upon request, the privacy entry in the first Canadian Encyclopedia.

I helped out as well in court cases, including in two landmark privacy cases in Canada - the Ternette (exempting intelligence files) and Parkman (mandatory SIN numbers from birth) cases.

I continued offering assistance, helping whistle blowers and individuals file access to information and privacy requests to locate information that they needed. These cases involved health and safety, alleged national security, harassment and personal reputation matters.

One effort involved helping Maher Arar, rendered forcefully to a Syrian jail, to gain his and Monia Mazigh's information along the long road leading to clearing Arar's name

after his release.

The majority of my privacy work over the years involved doing investigative research, using access to information and other avenues, to write about or have stories published on a variety of privacy matters.

That included research and published work and stories on a wide range of topics: computer matching, workplace surveillance, ID smart card usage, electronic viruses and spying, electronic bracelet use, drug testing, welfare snitch lines, hiding executive bonuses, Canadian information held abroad, anti-terrorist legislation, spy technologies like StingRay, drones, and on digital infrastructure and AI algorithms. Much of the work documented growing corporate marketplace and government surveillance.

Sometimes, that work was done with civil liberty groups like the International Civil Liberties Monitoring Group (ICLMG). ICLMG has mainly looked at a wide range of national security and privacy issues and has taken up the causes of individuals whose rights had been greatly affected by state actions.

One way Debbie and I have helped is by providing modest funding from our public interest fund for privacy awareness projects.

One such project was with the Canadian Civil Liberties Association to produce an on-line pamphlet on “Privacy and Covid-19”. Another project was with Open Media helping them develop a blog series to reach various groups on privacy dangers in a digital age. Several ICLMG projects received funding including for producing and distributing videos on facial recognition and extradition, and for preparing materials for discussion of needed security agencies' oversight legislation.

Over the years too, it has meant my appearing before federal and provincial committees reviewing public-sector and private-sector privacy legislation failings and suggested improvements.

Most recently, I have alerted parliamentarians and the public to draft or proposed legislation that allow government and businesses to more readily use digitized personal data records and AI tools claiming it's okay as the personal data is “deidentified”. (“Canadians' privacy could take a serious hit this coming legislative session”)

Privacy concerns continue to be top on the minds of many Canadians and are constantly under threat. Exposing such threats and advocating for much tougher privacy protection remains an important preoccupation of mine.