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## Keep Your Update to Yourself

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# KEEP YOUR UPDATE TO YOURSELF

THE FIGHT AGAINST AUTOMATED OVERSHARING HAS BEGUN - USERS ARE LEARNING TO TURN OFF THE SOCIAL-MEDIA DATA HOSE. BY NEIL RICHARDS



Frictionless sharing is on the rise as social media encourage users to share information automatically for a fuller online experience. Facebook “social reader” apps from the likes of the *Guardian*, the *Washington Post*, Spotify and SocialCam have allowed us to follow, automatically, what our friends are doing online. And, at the same time, they know what we are doing - the music we’re listening to, the things we’re reading, and the videos we’re watching.

To begin with, this was an exciting development, but we are starting to realise that frictionless sharing is not just a bad idea - it’s a terrible one, whose demise will accelerate in 2013.

Frictionless sharing is neither frictionless nor sharing. It has created for us the large friction of wondering who knows what about us, and of navigating mazes of user-unfriendly privacy settings. And it isn’t really sharing either. Real sharing is conscious sharing, telling people something we actually want them to know rather than automatically (and often unknowingly) blasting them with an out-of-control data hose. Users seem to be starting to understand this, and, according to AppData.com, which monitors online app usage, many are uninstalling social-reader apps, or are at least changing their settings, to limit their “sharing”.

What we read matters, and so does how we read it. The ability to access and assess information freely, without others watching or judging, is essential to our understanding of who we are as people and the kind of society we want to live in. Frictionless sharing of our reading and viewing habits threatens what legal scholars call “intellectual privacy” - the zone we need around our reading and watching so that we can think for ourselves without being affected by the often too-harsh judgment of the crowd. If we’re being watched or monitored when we read or surf the web, we’ll change our habits. A free and open society depends on our ability to close our virtual curtains and read subversive or embarrassing words in private.

Users are starting to demand an internet where we again can choose what we share, when we share it, and who we share it with. And that’s good news. Conscious recommendations, links and criticisms are more valuable because they result from intentional acts of expression, rather than software-controlled surveillance and dissemination. Unlike the automatic data hose that frictionless sharing produces, conscious sharing is the essence of free speech, because it lets us tell the world about things we want to say, whether it’s about politics, art, or a great new band. Frictionless sharing is on the wane. 2013 promises to be the year we start to get our intellectual privacy back.

Neil Richards is a professor of law at Washington University in St Louis, specialising in technology and civil liberties. His first book, *Intellectual Privacy (OUP)*, will be published in 2013

## HANGOVERS

Will be no more if David Nutt of Imperial College, London, can sell his benzodiazepine beverages.

