

By John Leyden

Fears about states' Big Brother-style invasions of peoples' privacy are outdated, and citizens should instead be worrying about how social networks and supermarkets are using their private data, says the president of Estonia.

Toomas Hendrik Ilves explained today at the annual International Conference on Cyber Conflict that Estonian law means citizens are the owners of their personal data. By law, citizens are provided with transparency tools showing how their personal information is being used by the Estonian government.

While there have been internal breaches of data held by the state - such as a policewoman accessing information on her boyfriend – there have been no external breaches, according to Ilves.

The Estonian president said he was always asked about fears over Big Brother when it came to state-sanctioned data collection, but dismissed these concerns as being based on an outdated question. Most users are sharing far more personal data, quite willingly, with commercial entities.

"No government follows you as much as a social network," Ilves said. "No government collects as much information about your preferences as a supermarket."

"Data on smartphones shows how peoples' weight loss plans or even how many push ups they make every day," he added.

Ilves also said that many users naively think free smartphone apps and social networks are good Samaritans giving them something for free, rather than making money by selling ads on the basis of harvesting users' personal data.

"It used to be said that there's no such thing as a free lunch, but now you can say there's no such thing as a free app," he said, adding that in the modern era of social networking and smartphone apps, states can act as "guardians of privacy" rather than invasive snoops.

Estonia is one of the most wired countries in Europe, and the Estonians aren't shy of delivering government and other public services through the web. The vast majority of banking (98 per cent) is conducted online, a similar number of tax returns (98 per cent) are filed online and 95 per cent of prescriptions are issued online.

Citizens can access e-government services using either an ID card ("which for some reason scares people in the English-speaking world", according to Ilves) or via the SIM cards in their mobile phones.

Estonia's love affair with the web even extends to its elections, with a full quarter of votes in the Baltic republic being cast online. President Ilves himself is a regular Twitter user, providing a refreshing alternative to the sanitised, PR-friendly Twitter feeds of most British ministers.

Back in 2007, civil unrest over the removal of Soviet-era memorials spilled over onto the internet, with several government websites knocked offline. A Russian student was later arrested over the attacks.

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