Your loss of privacy is a package deal

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The all-you-can-eat packages of voice, video and Internet services offered by phone and cable companies may be convenient, but they represent a potentially significant threat to people's privacy.

Take, for example, Time Warner Cable, which has about 2 million customers in Southern California. The company offers a voice-video-Net package called "All the Best" for $89.85 for the first 12 months.

But for anyone who has the wherewithal to read Time Warner's 3,000-word California privacy policy, you discover that not only does the company have the ability to know what you watch on TV and whom you call, but also that it can track your online activities, including sites you visit and stuff you buy.

Remember all the fuss when it was revealed last year that Google Inc. kept voluminous records of people's Web searches, and that federal authorities were demanding a peek under the hood? Multiply that privacy threat by three.

Internet, TV, phone -- it's hard to imagine a more revealing glimpse of your private life.

"All your eggs are in one communications basket," said Beth Givens, director of the Privacy Rights Clearinghouse in San Diego. "If a company wants to, it can learn a great deal about you -- and it probably wants to."

More often than not, it'll also want to turn a fast buck by selling at least a portion of that info to marketers.

All leading telecom companies are aggressively pushing these bundled service plans after investing billions of dollars in high-speed digital networks. For consumers, the upside is often a hefty savings compared with acquiring the same services from multiple providers.

The downside is that you're making intimate details of virtually all your network activities available to a single company -- and possibly government officials.

Earlier this month, a federal judge shot down a section of the USA Patriot Act that allowed warrantless access to telecom companies' databases. He didn't seem impressed that few phone companies and Internet providers had fought government efforts to get consumers' data.

For the moment, it's direct marketers, not the Department of Justice, that consumers have to fear.

Satellite broadcaster DirecTV Group Inc. offers video and Internet access. Its privacy policy says the company "may share customer information, including programming purchases, with selected media, entertainment and other similar service providers."

We all have a sense the Big Brother is watching, on multiple channels. Do you feel you have any privacy left -- and does it even matter?

Find the privacy policies of three providers

AT&T U-Verse:
https://uverse1.att.com/launchAMSS.do

Time Warner Cable:

Verizon FIOS TV:
http://www22.verizon.com/about/privacy/fiospolicy/

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These companies, the policy acknowledges, "may use this customer information to market products or services to you."

However, it's the service providers with a pipeline into your home -- the phone and cable companies -- that have the ability to amass the greatest trove of customer data. Just think for a moment about the calls you made yesterday, the shows you watched, the websites you surfed.

Put together, how do you think they make you look?

There are red flags to be found in each telecom provider's privacy policy. A close reading of Time Warner's policy reveals:

* Along with knowing juicy details of your calling and viewing habits -- those 900 numbers, say, or that subscription to the Playboy Channel -- the company keeps track of "Internet addresses you contact and the duration of your visits to such addresses."

* Time Warner not only compiles "information about how often and how long" you're online, but also "purchases that you have made" via the company's Road Runner portal, which provides access to thousands of goods.

* On top of that, the company may monitor "information you publish" via the Road Runner portal, which should send a chill through anyone who accesses his or her e-mail through Time Warner's servers.

That's not to say Time Warner or any other service provider is reading people's e-mail or invading users' privacy in any other way. The point is, they're explicitly saying they could.

No less troubling, you have to wade more than halfway into Time Warner's privacy policy before you're finally informed that the company also reserves the right "to disclose personally identifiable information to others, such as advertisers and direct mail or telemarketers, for non-cable purposes."

Craig Goldberg, Time Warner's chief privacy officer, said the company used to sell customers' info to marketers but had no plans at the moment to resume the practice.

"It's something we haven't done for some time," he said.

"But if we do decide to do it, we give people a chance to opt out."

Easier said than done. Time Warner requires customers to opt out in writing. Its privacy policy doesn't include a mailing address.

Telecom giant AT&T offers a TV service called U-Verse, which includes high-speed Internet access in conjunction with Yahoo Inc. The company's privacy policy says it tracks "pages you view, how much time you spend on each page, the links you click and other actions taken" when visiting AT&T Yahoo sites.

It also says AT&T compiles info on "viewing, game, recording and other navigation choices that you and those in your household make" when using the company's TV services.

Asked to elaborate, John Britton, an AT&T spokesman, said the policy spoke for itself.

"It fully complies with all legal requirements for disclosure of our privacy practices, and it is in line with the policies of our industry peers and other major corporations," he said.

For its part, Verizon Communications Inc.'s TV service, dubbed FiOS, also tracks users' activities. Much of that data isn't personally identifiable, the company's privacy policy declares.

"However, in order to carry out a request to watch a pay-per-view program or video on demand," it says, "the FiOS TV system may collect certain personally identifiable information, such as your account information, in addition to the product or service purchased, so that you may be properly billed for the program."

A Verizon spokesman confirmed that the company knew what you were watching when you watched pay-per-view programming.

Should you be worried?
Despite the obstacles, consumers should be diligent about trying to opt out of service providers being able to share personal data. There's not much else you can do.

"We're a bit closer to the Orwellian '1984,' " said Givens at the Privacy Rights Clearinghouse. "But that was a government eye, and this is a corporate eye."

At least you don't have to worry about these companies knowing things about you after you take your business elsewhere, right?

Wrong.

Near the very bottom of Time Warner's privacy policy, the company discloses that it maintains personally identifiable info about people "as long as you are a subscriber and up to 15 additional years." This, it says, is for tax and accounting purposes.

All in all, you may want to spend a bit more time with the Disney Channel and the Nickelodeon website.

Consumer Confidential runs Wednesdays and Sundays, and frequently in between. Send your tips or feedback to david.lazarus@latimes.com.