

'Free' Wi-Fi Usually Not Free Anymore

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SEVERAL days ago we visited [Trafford Centre](#) [2], which is a large shopping mall in Greater Manchester. The place is quite nice as it embodies very modern (yet classic) ornamental features, encompassing the best of outdoor and indoor decorations. It's all geared up towards consumerism, but there is also a nice cinema there. Now, here's the deal. Upon entering the mall one cannot help noticing that there is strong, universal Wi-Fi signal. Let's leave aside health implications. It's the same in other malls, such as the Arndale Centre near our house. It is also the same at airports, but if there is no payment needed for the Wi-Fi, then the user's identity is requested (if a payment is made, then the payment itself exposes the user's identity).



Following basic principles and common sense, I gave some fake details so that I can use the 'free' Wi-Fi anonymously and log into *Tux Machines* (checking the latest), but I not help wondering, still. Given what we know about NSA- and GCHQ-centric plans for surveillance on in-flight Wi-Fi, what are the chances that users' identities are being requested not just for marketing purposes but also for surveillance? It is becoming very hard to access the Net anonymously now. The UK is cracking down on 'free' Wi-Fi, saying that it facilitates copyright infringement and our home hub, which is open for all to use (no password needed), keeps warning us that it is "not secure" (because it facilitates sharing). This is actively being discouraged if not forbidden. In all sorts of beverage-serving places (hot or cold, or alcoholic) and restaurants it is getting hard to gain anonymous Wi-Fi access and the only way I've found (out of curiosity) to attain anonymous Wi-Fi use is First Class in high-speed British rail, provided one purchases the train ticket with cash. Similarly, it is getting harder to purchase groceries with cash here, at least without being penalised (not receiving a discount in exchange for identifying cards like Nectar). It sure seems like the very idea of anonymity here is becoming synonymous with crime. For experimental reasons I researched which shops in the UK still enable people to purchase a mobile phone anonymously. It's not easy, but it is still possible. Maybe it's no longer possible because I haven't surveyed the shops in almost 3 years.

We are entering a new unprecedented norm as those in power gradually phase in scary forms of governance in society, where the assumption is that anonymity deserves to be maligned and people should always identify themselves everywhere (also enable tracking of themselves by carrying a mobile phone) so as to avoid looking "suspicious". That's the mentality of mass surveillance that people have become accustomed to (and rather apathetic towards) in the UK.

It's stuff like this that made me exceptionally stubborn about deleting server logs in *Tux Machines* and not connecting to any third-party entity (e.g. with interactive social buttons, cookies), unlike most other GNU/Linux/FOSS sites. ?

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[1] <http://www.tuxmachines.org/taxonomy/term/122>

[2] <http://schestowitz.com/royrienne/gallery/index.php/Trafford-Centre>