There is little doubt that technology has changed the way Americans live. Computer and telecommunication technology has brought amazing transformations in the way people conduct their daily business—making everything from bank transactions to job searches faster and easier. Unfortunately, technology also has a negative side: it has made it easier for unethical people to invade the privacy of individual citizens. The reading “Will We Have Any Privacy Left?” theorizes how trends in technology will affect privacy by the year 2025. Will Americans of the future be forced to sacrifice privacy for advancements in technology? Read the following passage before you answer this question.

Our bad dreams about the haunted house called “Privacy, Circa 2025” are likely to focus on those all-seeing orbiting spy cameras that are always peering at us. They already exist, capable of observing from miles overhead that your lawn could use mowing and your dog needs a shampoo. By 2025, they will be really good. Audio spy technology has been advancing fast too. But the biggest threat to privacy doesn’t even exist yet. By 2025 it will be in full bloom.

Today we are engulfed by the signal-carrying waves of broadcast radio and TV. Come 2025, we will be engulfed by a “cybersphere” in which billions of “information structures” will drift (invisible but real, like radio waves) bearing the words, sounds and pictures on which our lives depend. That’s because the electronic world will have achieved some coherence by 2025. Instead of phone, computer and TV networks side by side, one network will do it all. TVs and phones and computers will all be variations on one theme. Their function will be to tune in these information structures in the sense that a radio tunes in station WXYZ.

These cyberstructures will come in many shapes and sizes, but one type, the “cyberstream,” is likely to be more important than any other. A cyberstream is an electronic chronicle of your daily life, in which records accumulate like baroque pearls on an ever lengthening string—each arriving phone call and e-mail message, each bill and bank statement, each Web bookmark, birthday photo, Rolodex card and calendar entry.

An irresistible convenience: your whole life in one place. Tune in anywhere, using any computer, phone or TV. Just put your card in the slot, pass a security test (supply your password and something like a fingerprint) and you’re in. You see your electronic life onscreen or hear a description over the phone, starting with the latest news and working back.

By feeding all this information into the food processor of statistical analysis, your faithful software servants will be able to make smooth, creamy, startlingly accurate guesses about your plans for the near future. They will find patterns in your life that you didn’t know were there. They will respond correctly to terse spoken commands (“Call Juliet,” “Buy food,” “Print the news”) because they will know exactly who Juliet is, what food you need and what news stories you want to read.

So it’s 2025, and the living is easy. You glide forward on a magic carpet woven out of detailed data and statistical analyses. But should anyone seize access to your electronic life story, “invasion of privacy” will take on a whole new meaning. The thief will have stolen not only your past and present but also a reliable guide to your future.
Such information structures are just beginning to emerge. They are likely to be far safer and more private than anything we have ever put on paper. Nonetheless, by 2025, a large proportion of the world’s valuable private information will be stored on computers that are connected to a global network, and if a thief can connect his computer to that same global network, he will have—in principle—an electronic route from his machine to yours.

The route will be electronically guarded and nearly impassable, unless the intended target has given out information he should not have—as people do. And unfortunately, electronic thievery and invasion of privacy are jackpots that keep growing. They are just the crimes for shameless, cowardly, clever crooks. No need to risk life or limb; just tiptoe over wires and through keyholes.

So what else is new? Technology always threatens privacy. Those threats usually come to nothing. They have been defeated before, and will be in the future, by a force that is far more powerful than technology—not Congress, the law or the press, not bureaucrats or federal judges, but morality.

You could, after all, get a pair of high-power binoculars and start spying on your neighbor tomorrow morning. But you won’t. Not because you can’t, not because it’s illegal, not because you’re not interested; to be human is to be a busybody. You won’t do it because it is beneath you. Because you know it is wrong, and you would be ashamed of yourself if you did it.

Laws are bad weapons in the fight to protect privacy. Once we invoke the law, the bad deed has ordinarily been done, and society has lost. Attempting to restrain technological progress is another bad strategy—it’s a fool’s game and won’t work. The best method for protecting privacy in 2025 is the same method we have always used: teaching our children to tell right from wrong, making it plain that we count on them to do what is right.

Outrageously naive advice for a high-tech future? Think again. It has been field-tested, and it works. All over the country, people leave valuable private papers in unlocked mailboxes along the street. Astonishing! Suburban mail is a vastly easier mark than anything in cyberspace will ever be. But our mailboxes are largely safe because we are largely honest. Some technology pundits have been startled by people’s willingness to confide their credit-card numbers to web sites. But for years we have been reciting those numbers over the phone. And we have all sorts of other long-standing habits (paying our taxes, for example) that reflect our confidence in the honor of our fellow citizens.

As we venture further into the deep waters of technology, temptations increase. When it comes to temptation resistance, we are admittedly not at the top of our game in early 2000. This is an age of moral confusion. We love to talk about law; we hate morality talk. But we will snap out of this dive, as we have snapped out of others before. Among our characteristic American obsessions, two have been prominent since 1776—our technological inventiveness and our stubborn desire to know and do what is right.

And by 2025, the issue will be framed differently. We are obsessed with privacy because we have temporarily mislaid a more important word: dignity. We talk about our “right to privacy,” but we don’t really mean it. This broken-down, ramshackle idea falls apart the moment you blow on it. Privacy to commit murder? To beat a wife or child? To abuse an animal? To counterfeit money? To be insane, refuse treatment and suffer never-endingly? Privacy is no absolute right; it is a nice little luxury when we can get it. Dignity is a necessity to fight for. And come 2025, life will be better: not because of the technology revolution but because of a moral rebirth that is equally inevitable and far more important.