Privacy

- Don't use VPN services.
- Normies just don't care about privacy

Don't use VPN services.

> This article was originally published at https://gist.github.com/joepie91/5a9909939e6ce7d09e29.

No, seriously, don't. You're probably reading this because you've asked what VPN service to use, and this is the answer.

> **Note:** The content in this post does not apply to using VPN for their intended purpose; that is, as a virtual private (internal) network. It only applies to using it as a glorified proxy, which is what every third-party "VPN provider" does.

- A Russian translation of this article can be found here, contributed by Timur Demin.
- A Turkish translation can be found here, contributed by agyild.
- There's also this article about VPN services, which is honestly better written (and has more cat pictures!) than my article.

Why not?

Because a VPN in this sense is just a glorified proxy. The VPN provider can see all your traffic, and do with it what they want - including logging.

But my provider doesn't log!

There is no way for you to verify that, and of course this is what a malicious VPN provider would claim as well. In short: the only safe assumption is that *every* VPN provider logs.

And remember that it is in a VPN provider's best interest to log their users - it lets them deflect blame to the customer, if they ever were to get into legal trouble. The $10/month that you're paying for your VPN service doesn't even pay for the lawyer's *coffee*, so expect them to hand you over.

But a provider would lose business if they did that!

I'll believe that when HideMyAss goes out of business. They gave up their users years ago, and this was widely publicized. The reality is that most of their customers will either not care or not even be aware of it.

But I pay anonymously, using Bitcoin/PaysafeCard/Cash/drugs!

Doesn't matter. You're still connecting to their service from your own IP, and they can log that.

But I want more security!

VPNs don't provide security. They are just a glorified proxy.

But I want more privacy!

VPNs don't provide privacy, with a few exceptions (detailed below). They are just a proxy. If somebody wants to tap your connection, they can still do so - they just have to do so at a different point (ie. when your traffic leaves the VPN server).

But I want more encryption!

Use SSL/TLS and HTTPS (for centralized services), or end-to-end encryption (for social or P2P applications). VPNs can't magically encrypt your traffic - it's simply not technically possible. If the endpoint expects plaintext, there is *nothing* you can do about that.

When using a VPN, the *only* encrypted part of the connection is from you to the VPN provider. From the VPN provider onwards, it is the same as it would have been without a VPN. And remember, **the VPN provider can see and mess with all your traffic.**

But I want to confuse trackers by sharing an IP address!

Your IP address is a largely irrelevant metric in modern tracking systems. Marketers have gotten wise to these kind of tactics, and combined with increased adoption of CGNAT and an ever-increasing amount of devices per household, it just isn't a reliable data point anymore.

Marketers will almost always use some kind of other metric to identify and distinguish you. That can be anything from a useragent to a fingerprinting profile. A VPN cannot prevent this.

So when should I use a VPN?

There are roughly two usecases where you might want to use a VPN:

1. You are on a known-hostile network (eg. a public airport WiFi access point, or an ISP that is known to use MITM), and you want to work around that.
2. You want to hide your IP from a very specific set of non-government-sanctioned adversaries - for example, circumventing a ban in a chatroom or preventing anti-piracy scareletters.

In the second case, you'd probably just want a regular proxy *specifically* for that traffic - sending *all* of your traffic over a VPN provider (like is the default with almost every VPN client) will still result in the provider being able to snoop on and mess with your traffic.

However, in practice, **just don't use a VPN provider at all, even for these cases.**

So, then... what?

If you absolutely need a VPN, and you understand what its limitations are, purchase a VPS and set up your own (either using something like Streisand or manually - I recommend using Wireguard). I will not recommend any specific providers (diversity is good!), but there are plenty of cheap ones to be found on LowEndTalk.

But how is that any better than a VPN service?

A VPN provider *specifically seeks out* those who are looking for privacy, and who may thus have interesting traffic. Statistically speaking, it is more likely that a VPN provider will be malicious or a honeypot, than that an arbitrary generic VPS provider will be.

So why do VPN services exist? Surely they must serve some purpose?

Because it's easy money. You just set up OpenVPN on a few servers, and essentially start reselling bandwidth with a markup. You can make every promise in the world, because nobody can verify them. You don't even have to know what you're doing, because again, nobody can verify what you say. It is 100% snake-oil.

So yes, VPN services do serve a purpose - it's just one that benefits the provider, not you.

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Normies just don't care about privacy

If you're a privacy enthusiast, you probably clicked a link to this post thinking it's going to vindicate you; that it's going to prove how you've been right all along, and "normies just don't care about privacy", despite your best efforts to make them care. That it's going to show how you're smarter, because you understand the threats to privacy and how to fight them.

Unfortunately, **you're not right**. You never were. Let's talk about why, and what you should do next.

So, first of all, let's dispense with the "normie" term. It's a pejorative term, a name to call someone when they don't have your exact set of skills and interests, a term to use when you want to imply that someone is clueless or otherwise below you. There's no good reason to use it, and it suggests that you're looking down on them. Just call them "people", like everybody else and like yourself - you don't need to turn them into a group of "others" to begin with.

Why does that matter? Well, would *you* take advice from someone who looks down on you? You probably wouldn't. Talking about "normies" pretty much sets the tone for a conversation; it means that you don't care about someone elses interests or circumstances, that you won't treat them like a full human being of equal value to yourself. In other words, you're being an arrogant asshole. And noone likes arrogant assholes.

And this is also exactly why you think that they "just don't care about privacy". They might have even explicitly told you that they don't! So then it's clear, right? If they say they don't care about privacy, that must mean that they don't care about privacy, otherwise they wouldn't say that!

Unfortunately, that's not how it works. Most likely, the reason they told you that they "don't care" is to **make you go away**. Most likely, you've been quite pushy, telling them what they should be doing or using instead, and responding to every counterpoint with an even stronger recommendation, maybe even trying to make them feel guilty about "not caring enough" just because they're not as enthusiastic about it as you are.

And how do you make an enthusiast like that go away? You cut off the conversation. You tell them that **you don't care**. You leave zero space for the enthusiast to wiggle their way back into the conversation, for them to try and continue arguing something that you've grown tired of. If you don't care, then there's nothing to argue *about*, and so that is what they tell you.

In reality, almost everybody *does* care about privacy. To different degrees, in different situations, and in different ways - but almost everybody cares. People lock the bathroom door; they use

changing stalls; they don't like strangers shouldersurfing their phone screen; they hide letters and other things. Clearly people *do* care. They probably also know that Facebook and the like are pretty shitty, considering that media outlets have been reporting on it for a decade now. You don't need to tell them that.

So what *should* you do? It's easy for me to say "don't be pushy", but then how do you help people keep their communications private? How do you help advance the state of private communications in general?

The answer is to **understand, not argue**. Don't try to convince people, at least not directly. Don't tell them what to do, or what to use. Don't try to make them feel bad about using closed or privacy-unfriendly systems. Instead, *ask questions*. Try to understand their circumstances - who do they talk to, why do they need to use specific services? Does their employer require it? Are their friends refusing to move over to something without a specific feature?

Recognize and accept that **caring about privacy does not mean it needs to be your primary purpose in life**. Someone can simultaneously care about privacy, but also refuse to stop using Facebook because they care *more* about talking to a long-lost friend who is not reachable anywhere else. They can care about privacy, but care *more* about keeping their job which requires using Slack. They're not *enthusiasts*, and they shouldn't *need* to be to have privacy in their life - that's the whole point of the privacy movement, isn't it?

Finally, once you have asked enough questions - *without* being judgmental or considering answers 'wrong' in any way - you can build an understanding of someone's motivations and concerns and interests. You now have enough information to understand whether you can help them make their life more private *without* giving up on the things they care about.

Maybe they *really* want reactions in their messenger when talking to their friends, and just weren't aware that Matrix can do that, and that's what kept them on Discord. Maybe they've looked at Mastodon, but it looked like a ghost town to them, just because they didn't know about a good instance to join. But these are all things that you *can't know* until you've learned about someone's individual concerns and priorities. Things that you would never learn about to begin with, if they cut you off with "I don't care" because you're being pushy.

And maybe, the answer is that you can't do anything for them. Maybe, they just don't have any other options, and there are issues with all your alternative suggestions that would make them unworkable in their situation. Sometimes, the answer is just that something isn't good enough yet; and that you need to accept that, and put in the work to improve the tool instead of trying to convince people to use it as-is.

Don't be the insufferable privacy nut. Be the helpful, supportive and understanding friend who happens to know things about privacy.