

Tracking Progress on Privacy

by [Alissa Cooper](#) [1]
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In November, the Federal Trade Commission will [hold its first significant hearings in ten years](#) regarding the future of consumer protection on the Internet. Yesterday, the Center for American Progress held a daylong event to frame the discussion in the fall, highlighting both issues that have lingered since the 1996 hearings and problems that were not foreseen a decade ago. CDT Deputy Director Ari Schwartz participated on a panel where he discussed the [recent CDT-CAP report](#) [2] on consumer privacy and protection. Ten years ago, panelists before the FTC noted that 82 percent of consumers were concerned about their personal privacy on the Internet and warned that the security of personal information was "essential if commerce in cyberspace is to flourish on the Internet." Although we have seen the consequences of a decade of data breaches and identity theft, one of the most notable developments in the privacy area -- praised by many of the yesterday's panelists, and long sought by CDT -- has been the recent show of support for comprehensive privacy legislation by many high-profile companies. Their continued support for a law that codifies fair information practices for businesses will be vital to securing consumers' online privacy in the future. Although the FTC has launched an impressive array of consumer protection initiatives since the first round of hearings, several panelists pointed out that some useful tools are still missing. Passage of the U.S. SAFEWEB Act (S. 1608) would allow the Commission to work more effectively with its international counterparts. This cooperation is becoming increasingly vital as the web of parties involved in Internet fraud and abuse spreads across the globe. The bill was approved by the Senate but awaits passage in the House. Some panelists, including current FTC Commissioners Jon Leibowitz and J. Thomas Rosch, also voiced their support for allowing the Commission to demand civil penalties in their consumer protection lawsuits, believing that such penalties act as strong deterrents to Internet criminals. Although the details involved in granting such authority to the Commission will require careful review, CDT supports investigating this kind of proposal. All in all, the event was a good opportunity to look back upon the lessons from a decade ago and to look forward to developments down the road. CDT anticipates that the hearings this fall will provide immense insight into the future of consumer protection in the digital age.

- [Transcript and staff report of the 1996 FTC workshop](#) [3]
- [CAP conference materials \(includes video of the panels\)](#) [4]

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