

## DEVIL'S ADVOCATE:

SAGE International Dialogue

### *Privacy in Perspective*

**S. White:** Today, modern developments in technology have expanded the possibilities of government surveillance exponentially. Aside from advances in surveillance equipment, the biggest game changer has been the growing of the 'cloud'; the permanent cyber space which collects all and any data posted online or between mobile phones. This means that most of us now leave traces of ourselves in the cloud, allowing anyone with the capabilities to investigate individuals with an ease not possible before. This has many fearing that we can no longer defend our own privacy. Various scandals such as Snowden's revelations of the NSA's phone hacking program, have served to legitimise these fears, proving that even in modern democracies such as the US, governments are willing to spy on their own citizens. It proves that governments are willing to operate on a completely secret basis, which means that we have no way of telling how far they are willing to go.

Here, perspective is needed. And the first thing we must understand is that even with the outrage over the NSA scandal, this shadowy world is not going away anytime soon. It is an intrinsic aspect of security now, and as soon as one nation decides against it, it is disadvantaged amongst the rest of the world. We already are disadvantaged, given how far more autocratic nations take it. If the technology is there to be harnessed, then governments will use it – it's that simple. And if you hope to simply protest surveillance out of existence, the problem with trying to ban secrecy is that it is secret! That's how it operates, that's what makes it work. And thus the shady world of secret surveillance stays at a strangely contradictory place within democratic societies which increasingly demand transparency. And yet, for the reasons mentioned, it will continue to stay.

However, before you don your best Guy Fawkes mask and rally to overthrow the new world order, take a step back, and try to get some perspective here...

Firstly, in Australia and other modern democracies, our situation isn't so bad comparatively. While we don't know the extent, we can still see the results, and as long as people aren't dragged off in the middle of the night for speaking ill of the government – we know that we have it infinitely better than some other nations.

Secondly, there are real tangible benefits to government surveillance which we can see, particularly in law enforcement. While more extreme civil libertarians may have legitimate fears about privacy, they often downplay the reality that there are bad people in the world, and that surveillance can be used to stop them. For example, when you hear of the arrests of members involved in global paedophile rings, covert surveillance more than likely played a key

role. Isn't the freedom of a child from sexual abuse more important than your freedom to not have your internet history checked? Of course it is.

Caution also needs to be taken when questioning whether we can really trust that the people behind surveillance are all of a high moral character. While it certainly is possible that there are questionable people handling surveillance, the lack of resources and motive for invading any random person's privacy should render most law-abiding people safe by default.

However, the most critical thing to understand in the modern era of online interconnection is that we have far more control over our own privacy than many theorise. We live in a strange age, a time in which people will cry in outrage over the idea of their privacy being invaded upon, while at the same time giving away their privacy without care. Every time you post a status, release a picture, tag a friend, fill in your details, you are purposely releasing intensely personal information that was once considered sacred. This information includes everything from your name, place of work, where you live to the places you frequent and the people you associate with. Even without government surveillance, this is an inherently dangerous practice. In fact you may be releasing this information to many who you may not know or trust. Some of these people may have a reason to use it against you, from competitive work colleagues, to dangerous characters such as stalkers or thieves. Indeed, a recent trend has been employers going through both prospective and current employees' Facebook pages – a practice which can lead to disadvantage or even employment termination.

Overall, even with the possibilities of secretive government surveillance, we are still very much in control of how private we are, and it all starts with how honestly we prize this privacy. It's simple. Don't want strangers knowing where you live? Don't post pictures of your house. Don't want strangers knowing all your relationship problems? Don't post them on Facebook. Be aware of what you are giving away, and who gets to see it. So there it is, secret surveillance is there, it can be scary, but it's not going away, it's not all bad and we are all in the same boat. When you really think about your own actions, it is clear that the biggest threat to our privacy is not surveillance at all. It is ourselves.

**J. Bruni:** *There was a time, early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when people were wondering whether the fusion of new technologies with the very real and immediate menace represented by fascism and communism, would realise the demise of the concept of human freedom represented by such things as personal 'privacy', a space where government, companies or other individuals could not intervene without direct permission, or by dint of clever manipulation as in older notions of spycraft, or simple personal indiscretion. In fact, so existential were fears of the fusion between technology and totalitarianism, that a world war was fought in order to preserve personal freedom so that an individual's thoughts, private musings and follies were*

*theirs alone to revel in and could only be accessed in onerous, time consuming and laborious ways, through the collection of human intelligence (HUMINT), or by an individual volunteering to share information about themself.*

*The pace of technological development during the Cold War, fuelled essentially by the desire for information and communications to survive nuclear conflict, gave birth to the Internet. Networks of computers linked together as well as to satellites, formed the basis of much what we now take for granted. Globally, the end of existential totalitarianism gave way to a world where, today, capitalism and the market is king. Western companies have economic power that was once the preserve of small states; their host countries supporting them in every conceivable way to ensure they are competitive against rival firms from rival countries. In doing so, companies, through their highly organised and cashed-up lobbyists, have successfully pressured governments to unleash the capabilities of the Internet on the public. There is now a total breakdown between the public and private spheres for the sake of total transparency, where the market knows your movements, your likes and dislikes, your friends and peccadilloes and can 'target' your spending habits and customise their advertising – all for the good and the convenience of the consumer. In this consumer driven world there are no political actors, only economic ones. The political classes of sovereign states are the servants to the global market. The consumer is the willing dupe. For cheap goods, the consumer surrenders any enduring interest in politics and any real interest in privacy, allowing the concept of consumerism to trump all other manifestations of social and philosophical thought. In this world, there is nothing that the market cannot fix. The market is mother and father. Gone are the posters where sternly looking, moustachioed national leaders once represented social dystopia. They have been replaced by the clean-shaven, friendly Wall Street trader, the banker and multitude of invasive fast food outlet logos – eerily reminiscent of the all-pervading symbols of totalitarian national power in days gone by. But there is more to this story. The state has not disappeared in favour of the corporation, at least not yet. There are autocracies and there are democracies and many '...cies' in-between. All are using the Internet to support their political causes and privilege, none are overly concerned about the state creating a surveillance system designed to keep this new economic order in check. Having an intelligence agency dip into the corporate wellspring of information on 'persons of interest' is only natural. There are paedophile rings, terrorists, organised crime racquets and individual criminals who are paraded before us on a daily basis as the new threats to order and civility, instilling anxiety and causing regular outbreaks of moral panic. Whenever we suspect that there is something wrong with the contemporary system, the transnational media groups play their role as the cipher for those in charge and roll out the new bogeyman of the day.*

*The world in which we live is by no means a terrible place. We've not had a general global war since 1945 and this is to be celebrated. But one does get the feeling that wars fought for the preservation of life, liberty, happiness and freedom are well and truly over. If we live in the most liberated and most transparent Western civilisation ever created, there should be nothing to fear, nothing to protest over. Government, corporate and outsourced surveillance,*

*with all the political protection Western societies bestow on their citizens, ought to allow us to remain in the bubble of untroubled consumerism, but that is only sustainable if the consumer takes an active role in being a citizen. Apathy therefore is not an option. In the post-political world we live in, where everything, including privacy, is reduced to an economic indicator, the future looks bleak. Wearable 'smart' technology is entering the market and consumers are likely to buy these items at an ever-accelerating rate, foregoing even the most intimate moments, as we are encouraged to share every detail of every step we take. Opting out of this all pervading system is not made any easier with 90 percent of commerce being based on Internet and related surveillance technologies. History will be the final arbiter as to whether we have shot ourselves in the foot. There must be some long-dead dictators laughing in their graves...*

*– Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International –*

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