

## What We Need to Learn from Snowden

Only by organising politically for human rights, including privacy rights, can we raise awareness of the dangers of Big Brother state surveillance.

BY RICHARD STALLMAN

Edward Snowden heroically demonstrated to the world the extent to which the United States (us) and some other countries have converted the internet into a system for general surveillance of everyone. They do this largely on the basis of corporations' surveillance: even if a company only wants to know what sort of ads to show you, the data it collected will be available to Big Brother.

We knew already that tyrannical states such as China, Tunisia, Libya and Iran did their utmost to monitor internet users. We had no proof that "free" countries did it too. For years, I have said in my speeches that I suspected the us government used the Patriot Act periodically to collect all the personal data from certain companies, simply because I saw that that law would permit it and the us government tends to stretch its legal powers; however, such suspicions are easy to dismiss as "paranoia". Thanks to Snowden, we know the us really does this with telephone companies. Meanwhile, India plans to practise phone and internet surveillance without even the flimsy "limits" that govern the National Security Agency (NSA).

This amounts to surveillance such as Stalin could only dream of. Even he could not make a list of every conversation, every purchase, every movement of every person. The us has nearly reached this level. India, with its national identity cards, is headed the same way. But it can get even worse.

Manufacturers of mobile devices now try to direct users to store their data in companies' servers instead of their own computers. If you're foolish enough to do this, the NSA can fish through your private data. In addition, many proprietary programs and devices spy on their users. On the Amazon Kindle, Amazon has access to all the "marginal notes" that the user makes about a book. If you use Windows, the NSA can break the security via bugs that Microsoft has reported to the NSA but has not fixed. (See <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-06-14/u-s-agencies-said-to-swap-data-with-thousands-of-firms.html>.)

The us uses its massive surveillance to imprison the whistle-blowers that inform us about government crimes such as

torture and massacres. When we cannot have secrets from the state, the state can keep the most horrible things secret from us. Sad to say, the us is not alone in this; India also commits plenty of torture and massacres.

Proposals to increase the level of surveillance cite certain standard reasons: typically, terrorism, pornography, or file-sharing. Terrorism is a real danger, but it is a small danger when compared to a state that the people can no longer control. As for pornography and file-sharing, they should be legal – if you don't like them, don't use them.

You can resist some of these forms of surveillance by limiting the data that you let anyone collect about your daily activities. Buying with a credit card informs the bank (and state surveillance) what you bought and, if you're in a store, where you are; I pay cash. Carrying a mobile phone tells the phone company (and state surveillance) everywhere you go; I refuse. Listening to music from a server account tells the company (and state surveillance) what you listen to, and may also restrict what you can do with it; I keep copies on my own computers or media. I don't give personal data to websites, aside from when I post a comment on one, and I avoid connecting my computer directly to those sites.

However, it is impossible to fully avoid surveillance while using certain sorts of digital technology.

For instance, there is no way to do email without surveillance. You can keep the contents of the message private by encrypting it – for instance, with the GNU Privacy Guard – but there is no way to stop Big Brother from seeking out who you exchange mail with.

We can do better by organising collectively against surveillance. This means campaigning to change laws so as to reduce general surveillance.

When people organise such campaigns, typically, the first proposal is to legally limit "access" to the accumulated data. This is inadequate to solve the problem. When the state wants to find an excuse to imprison a whistle-blower, it will find ways to satisfy whatever requirements there are. To avoid the total surveillance state, we need to limit the collection of data.

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Systems that log activities must be designed not to keep personal identifying data for very long, except when there is a prior court order to keep the data about a particular person. We must replace the advertising-based system for funding websites with an anonymous method for paying to access a page.

To raise awareness of the issue, and invite the state's surveillance agents to search their consciences about what they are doing, I now include the following note in most of my outgoing mail:

"To any NSA and FBI agents reading my email: please consider whether defending the US Constitution against all enemies, foreign or domestic, requires you to follow Snowden's example."

Here I appeal to these agents in the name of their oath of office. Snowden has demonstrated that surveillance agents can understand that the Patriot Act is not the same as patriotism; they can recognise their duty, and may have the courage to act on it.

However, I do not expect large numbers of agents to follow their consciences to oppose the wrongdoing of the state. To stop that wrongdoing, we need to organise politically for human rights, including privacy rights.

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