

An age of surveillance?

[Hussein Kesvani](#) and [George Wood](#) assess what the PRISM controversy means for ordinary citizens and the world

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Revelations published by The Washington Post and The Guardian suggest that the world of government secrecy and surveillance is not simply a conspiracy theory. If the facts on the National Security Agency programme, PRISM, are true, the data of citizens around the world are continuously accessed and stored in the United States.

The leak on this surveillance programme by Edward Snowden, a former CIA technical assistant, has reaffirmed the need to seriously question the trade-off between privacy and security, and how far governments have tipped the balance in the name of efficiency.

This is a debate which President Obama has conveniently welcomed, despite administration and much of Congress remaining silent on the matter.

Through unprecedented, warrantless acquisition of digital communications, PRISM represents perhaps the biggest encroachment of civil liberties ever in recorded history. Furthermore, while the Obama administration have argued their case on the grounds of duty to the protection of their citizens, the social networks that are said to be involved, including Facebook and Skype, have been accused of complicity in handing over private information of their users.

So while we all might have expected some form of state monitoring of our activity, the more fundamental question lies in what information intelligence officers actually have access to, and how far we can trust the social networks that govern a huge proportion of our lives.

Surveillance is not a new debate, and we should expect some form of state monitoring of our activity. In a post 9/11 age of violence and subterfuge, it has become more and more of a necessary evil to protect society. The recent Boston Marathon bombings are a painful reminder of the risks governments are dealing with.

But how far are they worth the cost of our individual rights? The central conflict in espionage is that nobody can really judge the how proportionate threats to society are. However, at the very least the methods of any national intelligence agency in a democratic society need continuous validation by the public, not just by appointed officials.

In democratic terms PRISM has failed. Legitimation that goes beyond self-certification for the sake of national interest takes time, money and effort, and PRISM has eschewed such processes in order to get results as efficiently as possible. This had led to a crude and almost abusive form of data mining that takes in and processes as much aggregate data as possible to analyse the behaviour of particular individuals and groups based on crude statistical predictions.

While only being concerned with 'metadata' (the patterns of large records of data, rather than the specifics of the data itself), PRISM is relentless and encompassing. According to Snowden, the NSA "targets the communications of everyone" and "ingests them by default", simply because this system of analysis and storage is the easiest and most efficient way.

But this method of getting the job done by any means possible is a prime example of what happens when security officials are presented with the tools needed to gather intelligence with only the blind faith of national interest serving as public validation. It is a vicious spiral.

"When you are subverting the power of government, that's a fundamentally dangerous thing to democracy. And if you do that in secret consistently as the government does when it wants to benefit from a secret action that it took. But they rarely, if ever, do that when an abuse occurs. That falls to individual citizens but they're typically maligned."

Fortunately, individual citizens are no longer alone in getting the NSA to take responsibility for PRISM. The European Commission's demands regarding NSA data requests illustrates new attempts to strengthen levels of accountability.

Now is the time for questioning our governments' willingness to undermine individual privacy without our discretion, and the measures that are being taken for the greater good. And this includes the UK government, which has urged airlines to refuse Snowden entry to the UK. PRISM may just be the start.



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