

AN ECONOMY OF SCARCITY

**rethinking privacy as a
condition not a commodity**

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In recent years the debate on privacy and surveillance has been bounded by an Orwellian language of control. When the status quo of corporate and government surveillance of the individual is challenged, its challengers already seem disempowered by a weak dialectic of us and them (government versus the people, or corporation versus the consumer). In challenging the extent of surveillance in our society it seems to me that we are already disempowered by our own adoption of an oppositional position. We find ourselves already appropriated into a discursive panopticon not of our own making, but of those we seek to question. By challenging the way in which we view what actually constitutes privacy, I seek here to find a means to turn the argument around. Can we reverse or detourne the dialectic of power that causes us to fear government & corporate surveillance of our private lives without adopting the same tactics?

To me it seems that the *economy* of privacy is flawed – that is the relation of how we calculate and assign value in what we consider to be the right of individual privacy. I believe that privacy is a child born out of the turbulent period in Western European Culture of the Renaissance and the Reformation. One can see it emerging in architecture and in the new technology of printing. It also begins to feature most particularly in the philosophies of the day as new ideas and access to old knowledge led to a dissatisfaction with the accepted explanations of the natural world and social order. This new sense of self led to a crisis and to the founding of the basic social, economic and political of the West that we have inherited today.

In the aftermath of Martin Luther pinning his propositions onto the door of Wittemburg church in 1517, what had been a near-universal religion of catholic faith, suddenly found itself split. All over Europe people began to choose sides, to exercise their own private conscience of faith whether they should follow the protestants or remain in the bosom of Rome.

When one faction of this schism prevailed in a geographic area, so privacy became a new and important technique for individuals wishing to maintain a facade of normalcy to one's neighbours and the authorities on the exterior, whilst practising conscience of faith within one's private domain, or even within the self. This can be seen amply in the architecture of Western Europe from the 1500s on: people built private chapels for worship, 'priest holes' were constructed to hide renegade priests in and many houses contained private chambers and secret rooms. Architecturally, there is a clear shift in domestic buildings away from communal spaces to separate places for individuals.

Printing too was an important step in this process of individual expression and consumption. The tradition in Europe of books being located almost exclusively in the great libraries of Abbeys and monasteries where they were read by a very few, slowly gave way to wider literacy in the general populace and to a greater circulation of knowledge through books. The religious upheavals gave impetus to covert printing of both books and religious and political tracts. Pamphleteers became the voice of conscience, and a new phenomenon emerged: the keeping of diaries and journals. Printing and literacy thus fed a burgeoning urban merchant class with the means to trade more than just goods, but ideas. It also created private spaces for their own reflections – places where people could confide their inmost thoughts in relative secrecy at a time when freedom of expression was neither a right, nor safe.

For this reason I believe that privacy – as we understand it today and argue for or against its inalienable rights – is a historically recent phenomenon whose roots are primarily steeped in the social, cultural, religious and political history of Western Europe.

Individual privacy is not such important a concept in the ancient Hellenistic cultures of Greece – privacy seems to be reserved for group religious mysteries such as the Thesmophoriseusae. The tribal cultures of Celts, Helvetii and later Goths, Huns and other Germanic tribes all appear to have their basis in communal shared existence. The Romans of the classic Augustan period seem to have reserved privacy for their senatorial patrician class and it is clear that much of the architecture of Medieval Europe made little provision for it. Even the monasteries, with their cells

for each monk, made little provision for individual privacy – openness and a shared life were valued much more highly – most cells would not have had a door or even a hanging to close off and create a private, personal space.

My belief is that what have come to associate with the concept of privacy developed alongside the emergence of the concept of the self: the cult of individuality that has become ever more deeply ingrained within our culture. This can be seen in changes to architecture, in the development of a literature focused on the self and individual experience and in the shape of capitalism and consumption that has fuelled the development of our society.

Charting the development of a concept of privacy alongside the emergence of the individual as the fundamental building block of Western democracy suggests to me that it is part of an economy of scarcity – one of the key tenets of the logic of capitalism. A thing has high value in a society because it is rare. In a world where the proliferation of surveillance devices, techniques and technologies has become rampant, a paranoia is developing concerning the erosion of personal privacy. Against this background we need to rethink some of our closely held conventions on the sanctity of privacy – to stop thinking of it as some kind of precious commodity and to experience it as a condition, irrespective of its materiality.

There is no clear means to do this but a process of questioning what could be described as a series of sacred cows is the starting point for a more general rethinking of the economy of our value systems that underpin the increasingly global society we live in.

For instance in focusing on the technologies of surveillance it seems to me that the prevailing arguments portray a weak populace as the victims of governmental and corporate intrusion. It describes a situation of powerlessness on the behalf of the everyday person, invoking a kind of hysteric paranoia. It is already co-opted by the language of control because it identifies the everyday person as a suspect, with the underlying implication that they are a criminal should they in any way disagree or oppose either a government or a corporation. It panders to the opposite ideal one of the most important pillars of democracy, that a person is innocent until proven guilty. Such a position consistently disempowers ordinary citizens in the face of government and big corporations because it offers no alternative to the structure of surveillance but to turn it around onto the surveillers. It is precisely limited because it cannot actually reach the people at the top – the architects of surveillance systems – and can only reflect those at the bottom, the technicians operating such systems.

The debate on privacy as played out recently in relation to the circulation of information on individuals via the internet and exchanged between closed corporate networks, seems to me to hinge on fear. It seems to suggest that without the historic concept of the sanctity of the individual right to privacy their identity is compromised. I am not sure that this needs to be, or is even desirable that it should be, the case, and I am coming to believe that our Western European notion of privacy is not an inalienable human right, but a custom. Looking around the world many other cultures have come to develop vastly different understandings of the dynamic of the relationship between individual society – where their personal identity is not so much confirmed by the assertion of self or individuality, but in relation to their community.

A new language of personal engagement is required to wean the West from its dependence on the cult of the individual. Fuelled by a kind of perverse Darwinian evolutionism, there is a particularly Protestant or even Calvinist ring to many of the arguments which emphasise the sanctity of the individual. It is no doubt that such thinking is energetic, but is it really in keeping with the kind of world we want to live in?

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