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Edward Snowden and the Politics of Privacy

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, August 1st, 2013

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I have come to think of the Moscow airport as a metaphor: a place of dubious refuge where there's no actual hiding at all. Although Edward Snowden has finally left, with a grant of asylum from Russia, we Americans remain trapped in its spy cycle. Each time we log onto the Internet, our use reveals more personal data to the NSA, which, according to recent news reports, has already collected over 20 trillion items of information about us.

Undoubtedly, we live in a dangerous world. Actors outside and inside our nation want to do us grave harm, and I'm glad Federal agencies are hard at work trying to stop them. But, despite the administration's assertions, there is not clear evidence yet that the NSA's American data-dragnet actually has produced results.

Why does this matter to creative people, to business leaders and culture innovators of all kinds? Because the ability to keep secrets is essential to creativity and innovation. We create in the enclosed spaces of our minds, in our studios, with our trusted teams and collaborators, or in the neighborhood coffee shop. Safe and supportive environments are ones in which creative thoughts thrive.

Our right to personal secrecy—you can also call it privacy—is fundamental to our ability to innovate. There is a time to present ideas to the public eye and let our creative babies out into the scary world but this decision must be our own making; when we are good and ready. As any artist will tell you, if you want to keep your commission, don't show a client a painting before it's done.

Many Americans seem complacent about the NSA's over-reach. They say: "So what? The NSA has been gathering all of our data for the past decade, and nothing bad has happened." This argument relies on the conviction that our government is benevolent and will always be that way. I'm not prepared to make that assumption.

In America's living memory, we have the blacklists of the 1950s. In the 1960s and 1970s, the FBI's COINTELPRO program launched operations against so-called "radicals" and falsified evidence against them. At times, this evidence wasn't designed to bring a criminal conviction. It was designed simply to be made public, to smear the reputation of the target.

Another complacent argument is this: "I have nothing to hide. Go ahead. Look at everything. Only terrorists will be worried." But we should all be worried. Most of us have something to hide, something we prefer to keep private for personal and creative reasons, and we need to protect the ability to share personal information at our discretion. Let's not dismiss the power of social pressure and fear. In Cuba, which I visited a few years ago, the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution are a highly effective means of keeping people in line. The CDRs are composed of busybody neighbors who report possible infractions "against the revolution" to the police. That's the no-tech version. In America, we have the high-tech version, which could prove even more

controlling.

Whenever governments have too much information about their people, they cannot be trusted to use it wisely. The only defense is not to let the government have it at all. So the question is: Who is more entitled to have secrets: the United States government, or you and me?

The best government is one in which transparency is the norm and secrecy is the exception. Instead, today we have a government where secrecy is cultivated. On the other end it often takes a court order to get our government to disclose any controversial information.

Conversely, the best kind of society is one in which personal secrecy is protected. The kind of society in which it is rare, and requires a court order, for the government to pry into your secret life. Today, it is clearly obvious the reverse is true. As new revelations published in *The Guardian* demonstrate, it does not require a court order for a low-level bureaucrat to gain access to practically all of your personal information.

This all has a chilling effect. We're all stuck in a metaphorical Moscow airport, with our creativity and culture in jeopardy, wondering which secret will be outed next.

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