

The government has been helping itself to our personal data all along

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In the last few months I've been writing about various efforts of the government - both on the local and federal level - to leverage our consumer technologies to learn about our driving habits, cellular records, and, in the event of cyber attack, access to email records. Taken in totality, one could be highly suspicious that virtually anything and everything about our lives is accessible to or actively being accessed by the federal government. It was just a matter of when, not if.

Those suspicions have been emphatically confirmed thanks to reporting largely by Glenn Greenwald with the help of a just-confirmed, self-professed leaker named Edward Snowden. On June 5, Greenwald revealed in *The Guardian* that Verizon is required by top secret court order to give the National Security Agency (NSA), "on an ongoing and daily basis... information on all telephone calls in its systems, both within the US and between the US and other countries (<http://bit.ly/16L89yo> [1]). The following day, *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post* reported a secret program called Prism, which "obtained direct access to the systems of Google, Facebook, Apple and other US internet giants..." and "allows officials to collect material including search history, the content of emails, file transfers and live chats." (<http://bit.ly/1baaUGj>) Presumably, Prism is limited to communications between the US and foreign nationals, but given the scope of what we know so far, can we really be sure?

(On June 10, Greenwald said in a televised interview that more surveillance revelations are to come, so the scope could be even wider, as hard as it may seem, by the time you read this.)

Some of the questions being asked are "is all this surveillance legal?", "is Snowden a heroic whistleblower or should he be prosecuted?", and "is all this surveillance really preventing terrorism?" And for all the partisans out there and those who like to play the blame game, "which of the last two administrations is to blame for all

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this?" All good questions, of course, but my answer to all of the above is "Not now."

While all the finger pointing goes on, we as citizens are wasting a critical moment of clarity. The scope of the surveillance is being laid before us. And it was and is being done with the secret approval of all three branches of the government. Regardless of your opinion of Snowden, his revelations caught our elected officials by surprise, and it's an opportunity for pure debate — no one had a chance to get their talking points out to the public in advance; there wasn't a big advertising campaign from special interests or contractors; the President didn't go on a stump speech tour to "sell" this policy; nor were there any "town hall" meetings on this matter.

This makes it the perfect time to tell your congressional representatives where you stand on surveillance - now through contact with their office. Before the political spin doctors and the corporations with the most to gain from surveillance pour money and influence into the debate leading into election season. Of course, some surveillance will be a certainty given our always-connected world. But you can help decide how much or how little surveillance we're willing to allow our servants to carry out and how transparent they are about it. If you're of the "if you've done nothing wrong you've got nothing to hide, have at it" mindset, be sure to consider the potential for abuse should the political party you don't support get to mind (and perhaps mine) the records of your personal habits and whereabouts. Even the innocent get swept up in metadata, and regardless of whether you've done anything wrong, the government still believes its access to metadata is essential.

Wherever you stand on the issue, remember that we purport to be a free and open society, so even when the government spies to the slightest degree on innocent people, society loses something precious.

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[1] <http://bit.ly/16L89yo>