

What do the Snowden Papers mean for our Security?

Does increased government surveillance make us more or less secure?

The argument regarding the increase of government surveillance is often posed as an exchange of freedom for security. This basic assumption is unlikely to be correct. Careful thought will reveal that these violations actually make us less, not more secure. So, we are giving up our freedom for less, not more security. If this is correct then we should obviously roll back these violations of our privacy.

Small Probabilities and False Positives

Whenever a situation arises where there are some tests which have only a small chance of finding a searched for result, and a much greater chance of a false positive, then the test is usually seen to be more dangerous than no test. So, most doctors believe that medical tests for rare diseases which are very unlikely in a particular patient are poor practice if they are much more likely to get a false reading that could lead to unneeded and possibly dangerous treatment.

In the same way, by spying on everyone, the government is much more likely to go after an innocent person, than to actually reveal a terrorist. We have seen almost no positive results from this spying, but lots of constitutional violations including corrupt employees and contractors spying on lovers. There is no reason to believe that they are more likely to find a terrorist than to arrest and detain or blackmail innocent people. In fact the evidence points the other way. This is not to say that the people in the NSA and their contractors are more corrupt than the average person, but rather that we should expect them to act like any other group of a few hundred thousand people.

But isn't surveillance needed to protect us?

The argument for the need for these activities is presented by those who run and use the program. We have the president and past presidents saying it is needed. We have the attorney general and heads of the NSA and CIA. It seems presumptuous for us, who have much less detailed knowledge, to say they are wrong.

But, every time we have stopped police and law enforcement from violating the constitution, or interpret the constitution more pervasively they have screamed about how they need that power. When we require them to give accused people access to an attorney, or stop them from making someone testify against themselves or their spouse, they tell us they won't be able to protect us if we tie their hands this way, but these provisions make us all safer, not less safe.

The police would like to be able to search homes for any reason at all without a warrant. If they could, do you think they would be happy about needing a search warrant and permission from a judge? Of course not. But these constitutional protections have made us more, not less secure.

Weakening the security of all Internet traffic

Finally, we should consider how the NSA's actions are affecting the security of the entire Internet. When the Internet began to be used for commerce and banking, we developed security measures to facilitate those transactions. The NSA has seriously eroded those protections for all of us. They have apparently put back doors in much of the basic hardware on the Internet, as well as some software and protocols used for secure communications. They have stopped both hardware and software makers from disclosing whether these back doors were made, so we cannot trust any major company. These holes in Internet security make us all vulnerable. They also provide an opportunity for crooks and foreign companies to exploit. The lack of trust erodes the conditions needed for effective commerce.

Companies that provided secure email and communications, but refused to erode their clients' security, have been forced out of business, and other companies who were going to enter the field to provide better security have decided they cannot risk entering the field and crossing the NSA. Foreign as well as domestic companies are afraid to trust American software and hardware makers, who are the best in the world.

So, we are eroding the constitution, and reducing our security and prosperity in this failed pursuit.

The Internet has been a bastion of freedom throughout the world, and America has been the guiding force and a protector of a free Internet. The world can no longer trust America to protect the Internet or be a model and force for freedom. This makes everyone in the world less free.

What does the future hold?

The information flowing across the Internet is currently being watched and recorded. It is inevitable that it will begin to be filtered and directed by those in power. When the FBI asks that requests for child porn be directed to their honey pots, who will object? When they ask that searches for how to make Sarin gas be given false results, who will object? In time results will be modified so more positive articles and less negative ones appear for searches regarding causes and politicians the NSA approves of. The reverse will happen to the causes and people that the NSA does not approve of. Our freedom will be gone. These actions are of course, top secret, so no one will know. If these actions are reported, the report will be classified. We will be less secure, and the world will have lost the light of freedom our country once was.

By Steven Shank: October 7, 2013

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