

January 2018 Tuesday Topic: Surveillance as Censorship

Welcome to Tuesday Topics, a monthly series covering topics with intellectual freedom implications for libraries of all types. Each message is prepared by a member of OLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee or a guest writer. Questions can be directed to the author of the topic or to the [chair of the IFC](#).



Government surveillance is again at the [forefront of the news](#), as the Senate approved a six-year extension of Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) last week, and Pres. Trump signed it into law on Friday. Passage means that the federal government may collect without a warrant email, phone records, and other communications of non-U.S. citizens overseas. U.S. citizens may be impacted if they communicate with monitored parties. For a reminder about why more surveillance is antithetical to intellectual freedom, read the following essay by guest writer Kristian Williams. What sorts of surveillance happen, or don't happen, at your library?

Surveillance as Censorship By Kristian Williams

If freedom exists anywhere in the world, it must exist, as Orwell put it in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, within "the few cubic centimetres inside your skull." The freedom of thought -- the right to have your own beliefs, your own opinions, your own ideas, your own views -- is fundamental and nearly absolute. Without the right to think freely, all other freedoms are meaningless, and perhaps even inconceivable.

Yet rarely does thought proceed unaided. It needs its stimulus, its inspiration, its spark; it requires information, as fuel; and it must have a sense of imaginative possibility, like oxygen, to burn. It is possible of course to find these ingredients among any of a variety of sources: from conversation, in music, from direct observation of nature or social life. But for many of us, the surest source is reading.

Reading enlarges one's world. It can give us knowledge of places we will never visit, people we will never meet. It can even help us to imagine events that have never occurred and things that have never existed. In all of these ways reading can help us to see more clearly the society we do actually inhabit, the lives we lead, and as importantly, it can help us to imagine that things could be otherwise.

It is probably uncontroversial to say that there is a relationship between what we read and what we think, though the more we read and the more we think, the more complex that relationship must necessarily be. But because it is practically impossible to monitor and control the thoughts people actually *have*, it is always tempting for authorities -- or, merely, authoritarians -- to limit the ideas we have access to. The crudest form of this pursuit is direct censorship, banning books in an attempt to abolish certain ideas.

But an actual prohibition is probably not necessary. There is no need to limit the books available to readers if the readers can be induced to limit themselves.

It is a fact of human psychology that being watched changes our behavior. We grow self-conscious. Every action becomes a kind of performance. We consider how we must seem to others, how we appear to them, how they judge us. When those observers have power over us, the surveillance itself can be coercive. We adopt the standards of our monitors, adjust our behavior according to their expectations. Surveillance breeds caution and conformity; it discourages curiosity and stifles creativity. It closes the space in which we can try out new ideas, new styles, new viewpoints.

The expectation of privacy is not, strictly speaking, about hiding wrongdoing, any more than the freedom of speech is about promoting obscenity. There's nothing wrong with reading. There is nothing illegal, or even untoward, in books about job-hunting, surviving mental illness, or tenant's rights -- or, alternately, *Tintin in America* or *The Satanic Verses*. But depending on the circumstances, you might not want your boss, spouse, landlord, children, or even your friends to see you reading them -- to say nothing of total strangers who just happen to have security clearances.

We understand intuitively that even to show an interest in certain topics might be seen as suspicious, and thus many people will instinctively avoid those subjects if they fear their reading habits are being tracked. You might, for example, sixteen years into the War on Terror, grow curious as to what Islamists believe and what they are trying to accomplish. You might be reluctant to investigate the question, however, if you fear that doing so will lead police or intelligence agencies to review your library records.

Our books, our newspapers, our web searches cease to be simply items of personal choice, sources of information or entertainment. They become, at least potentially, pieces of evidence, elements in a case, data points in a profile assembled by algorithms and referenced by bureaucrats to determine whether we are suspicious, unreliable, subversive, dangerous. We know this, and we grow timid in that knowledge.

In the late eighteenth century, the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham designed a model prison, "the Panopticon," with a central guard tower and backlit cells at the periphery. The operating principle, as Michel Foucault described it in *Discipline and Punish* (in the French, significantly, *Surveiller et Punir*), is that "the inmate must never know whether he is being

looked at at any moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so." The effect is "to induce in the inmate a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power." (201).

Orwell imagined something similar in the operations of the Thought Police:

"There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. . . . You had to live—did live, from habit that became instinct—in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized."

The insidious thing about surveillance is the way that we internalize it. We become, as it were, our own jailers, our own censors.

Bentham believed that society might be governed according to just this very principle, the operations of power internalized, the anxiety of observation producing individual discipline. The Panopticon's architecture, physical and organizational, he suggested, could equally well structure hospitals, asylums, schools, or any similar institution.

A library, however, ought not be a Panopticon, but its virtual opposite. A library should be both a sanctuary and an observatory. Within its walls, we mere individuals the inmates of society, can view the entire universe of human thought, if we choose, and gaze deeply into ourselves, if we choose, and do so undisturbed, without the fear of scrutiny or exposure or judgment.

If people cannot read freely, they cannot think freely, they cannot speak freely, they cannot act freely. The small space within our skull becomes a windowless cell.

Sources

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Bio

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