

Democracy's close watch on our government's reputation factory

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ABSTRACT

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FULL TEXT

Most Americans have been aware of government surveillance for security purposes, but few realize the extent of these programs.

Edward Snowden, a contractor hired by the National Security Agency, has revealed the scale of the operations: This agency has been collecting the private communication of every American for sorting by topics deemed to be dangerous or subversive.

The debate has already turned to the legality of Snowden's actions, especially by comparison with the constitutionality of the surveillance he is exposing; and there is likely to be debate about the degrees of the threats themselves that the surveillance is monitoring. But there is more lurking here in the sheer scope of the government actions that Snowden has revealed.

This revelation can serve as a reminder for public scrutiny at the boundary between security and rights. The rationale for the government's gathering of information is to track the actions of criminals and terrorists, but these government actions can themselves become dangerous.

American democracy requires not only citizen rights, as laid out in the first 10 amendments of the U.S. Constitution, but also the need for citizen oversight, at least through representatives, of the powers of government to ensure that those rights endure.

The American founders crafted the Constitution to achieve a balance of power and liberty; they created the Goldilocks of governments: enough power for effectiveness, but not so much that it would trample rights. The rest is up to us, their inheritors, to check in on that balance; they insisted only that the checking should be open and public. That's deliberative democracy, with public debate on such crucial issues.

Like a hammer that can be used to build or destroy, this intimate cache of information can be used to protect or manipulate. The government actions to protect citizens from threats can just as easily be used to protect politicians from political challenges.

These political threats are made possible by the mass society in which we live. A side effect of our large numbers is an erosion of personal relations, notably in our limited contact with powerful figures who make decisions about the policies shaping our lives.

Instead of personal knowledge of these leaders, we have words and images from news accounts, web pages, posters, commercials and public-relations firms.

In other words, we generally only know these leaders through streams of information, sorted with ever-improving

information technology; the person we know is really a crafted reputation, and the best crafting produces a reputation that looks uncrafted. To steer through these claims on our attention, each citizen establishes his or her own standards of trust from among numerous sources; for example, some prefer Fox News, some NPR. The enormous vats of information that the National Security Agency is collecting for security purposes can just as easily be used for this same process of reputation crafting, but now with much bigger tools. Similarly, if any citizen raises questions about the validity of a government policy or the soundness of a particular leader, government officials with access to information can also tailor that information stream to discredit the critic. The information itself is just raw data -- as Snowden has revealed, the quantity being gathered is staggering -- and current technologies can sort the information with sophistication beyond most people's imagination. Much of the information will surely be employed for its intended purpose, for preventing nefarious acts. But the potential for manipulation is also staggering. The information and the technology can readily be used to shape reputations, positive or negative. In a mass society grown used to impersonal relations, there would not even be much awareness of the way those public images are being shaped. The democratic task, through contact of representatives or watchdog groups, is to make sure the agencies for collection of information do their security job without diversion of private information for political purposes. Otherwise, your next political enthusiasm or outrage may be cooked up following a recipe written with information stored in the National Security Agency.

Credit: Paul J. Croce, Guest columnist

Illustration

PHOTO: Croce ; Caption:

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