

# Internet savvy nonprofits shoulder digital surveillance

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STAFF WRITER

Last month's unveiling of the vast, multi-faceted efforts the National Security Agency has put into collecting private data — paired with the outing of NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden — has left Internet users across the country feeling vulnerable, violated and begging for answers. As reality sets in for users small and large, one group of online consumers, nonprofits — which rely heavily on social media outreach — face heightened uncertainty in a once-trusted medium.

To get a better grasp on what nonprofits are up against in the new age of compromised privacy, we spoke with Jeffrey Chester, the executive director of the nonprofit Center for Digital Democracy, who has studied and advocated for consumer protection in the digital media age since the '80s.

**Alex Zielinski:** *Why are nonprofits, specifically, threatened by the NSA's surveillance?*

**Jeffrey Chester:** I think that nonprofits are less cautious about what

they do online than others. Many just see the Internet as a key mechanism for informing their community and fundraising, and nothing else. Thing is, there are negative consequences that come from their enthusiastic embrace of the internet — and I don't think nonprofits have taken them



Jeffrey Chester

seriously. To think that the government doesn't have access to what they put online is naive.

**A.Z.:** *What kinds of threats are they facing, exactly?*

**J.C.:** Many networks like Facebook and Google have deliberately built in a surveillance system to their sites, and the connection these Silicon Valley corporations have with the NSA is much deeper than we realize. What the NSA is able to harness, Facebook and Google can release into the world. And it could ruin you or your business.

This partnership is a powerful, unaccountable system with vast implications. I think that many nonprofits that are online don't see the dark side, or just have the "can't beat 'em,

join 'em" mentality. But it's one thing for the government to know you like a certain book or a T-shirt, it's another thing for them to know your health issues, financial status, and private information about your children.

However, I don't think this surveillance is going to stop what nonprofits do — just make them more aware that the government could be eavesdropping at any moment online.

**A.Z.:** *So what can nonprofits do?*

**J.C.:** I think nonprofits have to develop an agenda here to make the government and the social networks much more accountable for what they're doing.

**A.Z.:** *But do nonprofits really have a chance when standing up to these corporate giants and the NSA?*

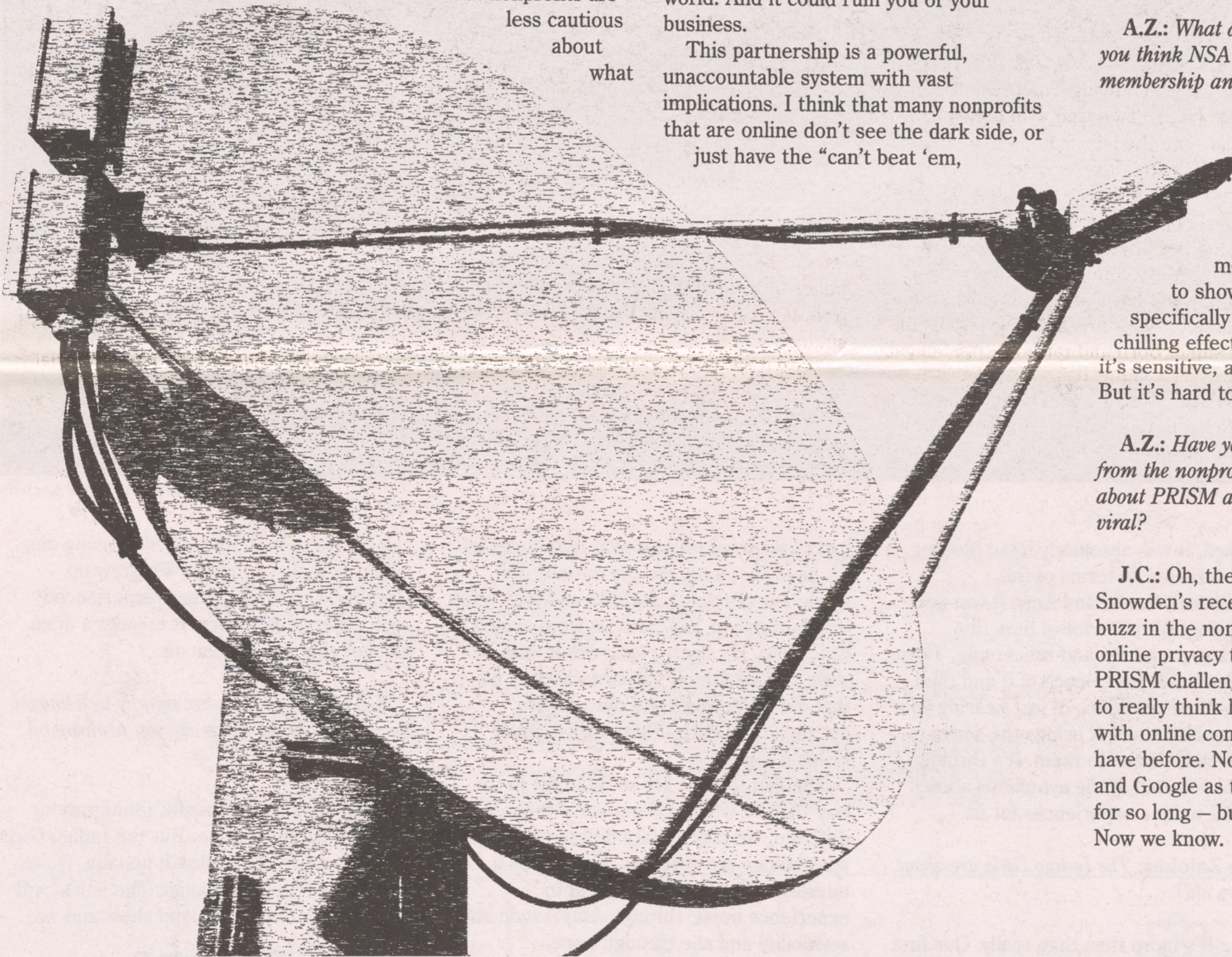
**J.C.:** Yes, I think so. It just takes more groups taking a stand and making their voices heard. I mean, look at how successful European NGOs have been at pushing legislation, putting places and people before corporate giants. It can happen here too.

**A.Z.:** *What about nonprofit supporters? Do you think NSA infiltration could affect membership and donor participation?*

**J.C.:** I don't know whether or not we'll know more about what the NSA is specifically looking at in the coming months. If there was evidence to show that donor lists were specifically looked at, this could have a chilling effect on nonprofits, especially if it's sensitive, activist or controversial work. But it's hard to gauge at this point.

**A.Z.:** *Have you seen a substantial reaction from the nonprofit community since news about PRISM and Edward Snowden went viral?*

**J.C.:** Oh, there's no question. PRISM and Snowden's recent leak has created a huge buzz in the nonprofit community around online privacy that wasn't there before. PRISM challenges the nonprofit community to really think hard about their relationships with online companies, more than they ever have before. Nonprofits have seen Facebook and Google as these tools of empowerment for so long — but now they're waking up. Now we know.



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