

Watching Big Brother

The author of 'They Know Everything About You' explains how data miners, from Facebook to the feds, are eroding our democracy

BY MEGAN WILDHOOD
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Robert Scheer is a political writer, editor of Truthdig.com and an activist who has interviewed every president from Richard Nixon to Bill Clinton.

He is the author of several books, including "They Know Everything About You: How Data-Collecting Corporations and Snooping Government Agencies Are Destroying Democracy," which Nation Books released in February. He spoke with me by phone about some of the key issues in his book.

Megan Wildhood: How would you respond to the idea, "Well, if you have to keep it private, you probably shouldn't be doing it" or "I'm not worried about the government spying because I've got nothing to hide."

Robert Scheer: You have to ask somebody who says that why they don't have anything to hide. I mean, why don't you have any thoughts that are questioning or challenging or that might be troubling to people in power?

The whole assumption exercise of freedom guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution is that people should have private space to contemplate thoughts that people in power might find threatening. The whole premises of the U.S. Constitution are: a) you should be suspicious of government and so should attempt to limit it, and b) government will attempt to be coercive.

So when people make that statement, they clearly don't understand the exercise of freedom, and it indicates a frame of mind that is quite dangerous.

M.W.: Where do you think that mindset comes from?

R.S.: It's the result of acquiescence to a consumerist society and overwhelming state power and propaganda of national security and warnings of danger, to justify taking ever more power. But it's merely a cloak for concealing obstructions of individual liberties and justice.

I mean, that's the oldest story in human existence. Every tyrant has had that justification and rationalization for depriving citizens of freedom; there's nothing new about that. And if people don't have the private space to question and challenge and think thoughts of their own, they're not going to be free; they'll just go along.

M.W.: Speaking of not having private space, you have said in your book that people should be concerned with things like Facebook and Google, perhaps even

more than the National Security Agency.

R.S.: Well, not more. Government has the power to arrest you, to stifle dissent, to break up a movement like Occupy or to break up a labor strike. Government has military force, and that's why the Constitution is geared toward restraining government.

Now, what you're pointing to, though, and the book does, is that we assumed there was a separation between the private sector and the government sector. That's what people do as consumers; that's why they let Yelp follow them and why they use Facebook and turn over their privacy or have an Apple Watch, because they assume that this is somehow a private transaction.

And in the name of consumer sovereignty and being a more effective shopper, people are willing to give over a tremendous amount of information, information that no totalitarian regime could ever obtain: Where are you every minute of every day, how far are you reading in a book, what are you listening to, et cetera.

So what happened in the revelations of Edward Snowden was that illusion that there was a wall between the private and the government sector was shown to be a fraud. The government has total access to all of that information and can mine that data.

We don't know to the degree to which that's used in a pernicious way, because it's all done in secrecy. And except for the break with somebody like Snowden, who's one of the great heroes of American history, we learned that, in fact, there is no such thing as the private AT&T or Facebook or Google. All that data is turned over, willingly or unwillingly, by those companies to the government, hacking into fiber optic cables, going back door into their computer setups and so forth.

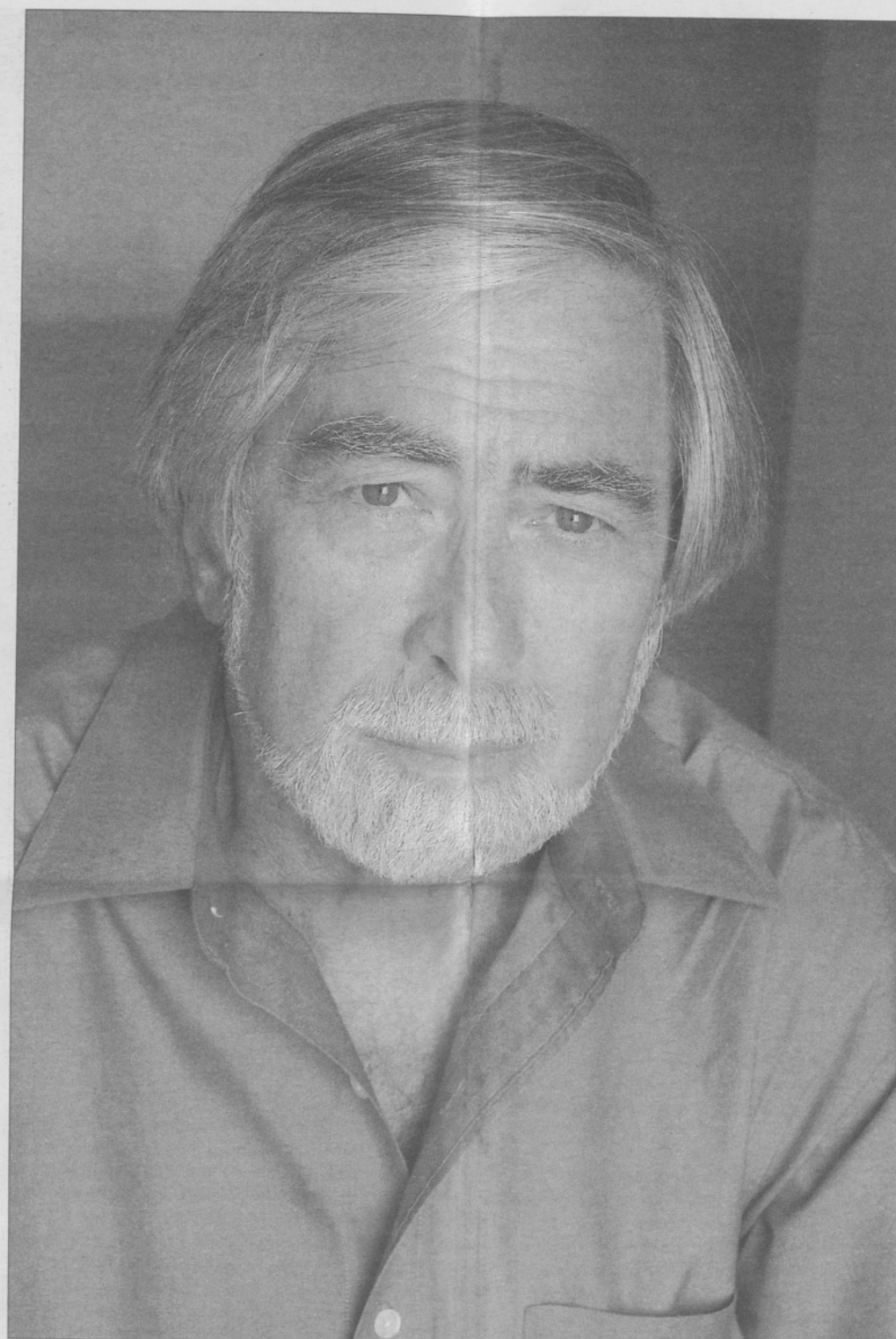
The importance of what we've learned is that there isn't a private sector that can protect your individual freedom or privacy; government can consume all of it. There isn't a distinction, really, between what Facebook and Google gathers and what the government can obtain.

M.W.: The sunset of the Patriot Act — some say it was an improvement, some say nothing really changed. What happened?

R.S.: The Freedom Act, passed June of this year, is better than the Patriot Act. A good chunk of it was written by the same person who wrote the Patriot Act, Jim Sensenbrenner, the congressman, and he felt betrayed by what the government did with the Patriot Act. But there has been some improvement.

The problem is that people think that the sunset of the Patriot Act and the passage of the Freedom Act solved the problem. That's very dangerous. It's a minor improvement in the collection of mass data. It doesn't address the endemic problems of the degree of snooping that the government can do unchecked and all 17 intelligence agencies and the data mining and everything. And because of the improvement in technology of snooping, the government knows a lot more now than it did even under the Patriot Act. I mean, every month, there's an improvement in their ability to spy on us and gather this data. Computers become ever more efficient, and the government becomes ever more aggressive.

And this is a key thing to point out to people: People are willingly giving up an enormous amount of information every minute of the day. When the FBI was going after Martin Luther King, they actually had to have a room in the hotel next to him or somebody had to follow his car in a car; there was visible evidence. None of that's needed now. MLK wouldn't survive two weeks with the FBI now.



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They would know every thought and every person, contact, piece of food he ate, everything.

So it's really quite ominous if you think that individual sovereignty is important, individual space and freedom, and I think that's the ballgame. Without that space, you don't have freedom; it's that simple. People can think they're free because they're free to shop and as long as they have enough money to shop, OK, they think things are great. But your very first question, the people who say they have nothing to hide means they're not going to have any interesting thoughts. They're not going to be provocative in their thinking, they're not going to challenge, and that means they're not going to be free, because freedom is to think the provocative thoughts.

M.W.: One of the quotes from your book that the former NSA and CIA director Michael Hayden said is:

"We kill people based on meta data." What do you think he means by that?

R.S.: Just this week, I downloaded an electronic version of "1984." And I read it online on my smartphone, and then I sent some emails with remarks to some people about it. Well, all of this now is a part of the vast haystack of data.

There are 250 Silicon Valley companies that do some kind of data mining that were founded by the CIA, companies like Palantir that are advising local police departments.

Is the Seattle Police Department plugged into the data of the 17 national intelligence agencies? Are they correlated with the NSA and CIA databases? Are the folks there that care about privacy under surveillance? Are people checking if they read "1984" and how they responded? Is that somehow turned against them?

I mean, this is a weapon against individual sovereignty. I use that phrase because it is the assumption of the U.S. Constitution that we are sovereign and we give over power to our government and we have to observe that government very carefully — whether it's local, state or national — to see that they don't abuse that power. And we have no ability to do that because this is all done in secrecy.

What happens to the data? What is the SPD relying on? Who's advising them? Who are these companies? Are they truly private companies or are they in fact founded by the CIA as, say, a company like Palantir, which is advising the LAPD? Are they also advising the SPD on data mining? It's shocking how readily we gave up our freedom in the aftermath of 9/11 and, in the grand scheme of things, it was a rather minor attack compared to the civil wars and everything that other countries have experienced.

M.W.: You've talked about how the mass surveillance construct has been used to monitor the people receiving SNAP to make sure they're not "wasting government money." Do you see other connections between mass surveillance and poverty?

R.S.: The government cracks down most effectively and viciously on people with little power. They don't go after the big banks or Wall Street or the big corporations, like GE, that ships two out of three jobs abroad and doesn't pay taxes.

They go after people who are vulnerable, who don't have big lawyers and so forth. They go after programs in the community that are trying to help people and make examples of them. And the most depressing thing, they go after people who are vulnerable who try to complain about their situation, like we saw with Occupy.

We have encampments of the homeless on entrances to the freeways all over the place in downtown Los Angeles, for example, but that doesn't seem to bother people. It was when there was an Occupy encampment at City Hall that was visible because it troubled the people who work for the county, city and federal government. And so a liberal democratic mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa, got the police to clear it out.

I was there that night — they weren't threatening anyone. It was unsightly to the people who run government and the big banks and the financial district who have created these problems. So what did they do? They find all kinds of excuses, claims of petty theft, etc., to clear out the place. Yet, you now walk five or six blocks from City Hall today and you'll find vast encampments in downtown LA. It doesn't bother these people at all.

So surveillance is used to intimidate people who might object or protest, to go after them; that's what it's all about, to stifle criticism and to protect the powerful. It's not about foreign enemies or making us secure; it's about protecting the privileged people and an economy that has a great deal of imbalance between the super wealthy and most everyone else. It's domestic surveillance.

If you try to look at where does this information help us stop terrorists, there's not one single example that the president of the United States could come up with. Every time we have some incident, whether it was the Boston Marathon bombing or Charlie Hebdo in France or the 9/11 hijackers, those people accused of the crime were well-known. Some of them had already served time. They didn't have to collect the data on everybody in

the world to find them; we knew who they were; you can read the 9/11 Commission Report.

But it becomes an excuse for collecting data on all the people in the world, which is inefficient in making us more secure; you've got too much data, (so) you can't connect the dots.

On the other hand, you can go after people that trouble you because they're making waves of dissent.

That, I think, is the real danger of the surveillance society. It's to intimidate people, and it's a very powerful tool. With modern technology at the service of big government, you can destroy individual freedom quite effectively, and most people won't even know it's being destroyed. They've lost the habit of freedom, which is to make noise, to

object, to challenge, to have unconventional thoughts. And that's what they're able to steam roll out of existence.

M.W.: What can people do, individually or collectively, especially once they've become informed of the issues of mass surveillance?

R.S.: I think there are reasons for optimism, believe it or not. I think first of all, you need the whistleblowers and there are all too few of them. I mean, there were probably a million people that had the same kind of security clearance that Snowden had, and we only had one Edward Snowden. You only had one Bill Benny, only one Chelsea Manning and so forth.

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So we need the whistleblowers, because when you have the

whistleblowers, it creates a great contradiction for the companies like Microsoft and Apple and Facebook and Instagram and Google, because these are multinational corporations that require the confidence of consumers all over the world.

People in Germany, for instance, start to question why these little Google trucks running around their neighborhood taking pictures of their houses if they're in fact in cahoots with the American NSA. And so that contradiction has caused a lot of trouble for these big companies, and that's why they are pushing back against the NSA and CIA. You want to sell the Apple Watch, people all over the world have to know why do you need my heartbeat, why do you need to follow me all day long? And then the answer is because this will make you a more effective and happier consumer.

That's the idea, you know, buy our product and you'll be more efficient, more fulfilled, those sorts of things. But you're not a multinational corporation if you're under the watch and power of the American NSA or the CIA or the FBI, and that causes a problem for your business model. And that's what's going on now, as I discuss in the book: You're getting serious pushback from companies like Google and Apple against the surveillance state.

And we also have people in this society, who relish freedom all across the political spectrum, who are pushing back, that have that taste of freedom and are saying this is wrong. It's not the kind of society we want to live in. We don't want to be observed every minute, and we want our private space protected, which is, after all, what our various Constitutional amendments are all about.

We have the right to challenge our government. That's what the division of power is for in our Constitution.

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