FRIDAY EXTRA!

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SECURITY/ PRIVACY

Author questions how much government surveillance is enough

Erick Bengel/The Daily Astorian

Kristian Williams, an author and freelance writer, led a group of locals through a discussion of government surveillance, security and privacy at the Astoria Public Library last week as part of the Oregon Humanities Conversation Project.

By ERICK BENGEL
The Daily Astorian

Government surveillance, carried out under the banner of security, has advanced so rapidly that society's customs, expectations and laws regarding privacy have not kept up with the sea change. ¶ The issue is often framed as a zero-sum contest between security and privacy: How much surveillance is enough, and how much is too much? Who decides?

Kristian Williams — an author and freelance writer whose work has focused on how policing, counterinsurgency and government use of torture impacts human rights and civil liberties — posed these questions to a group gathered at the Astoria Public Library last week.

"I think, unless our understanding — both collectively and individually — starts to advance very rapidly, we're not going to get to make choices, even as a society, about whether privacy exists. It will just be gone, because of our inattention and sort of cultural lag," he warned.

The event, "Keeping Tabs on America," part of the ongoing Oregon Humanities Conversation Project, drew locals concerned about the scope of government surveillance, and who questioned whether screening every cellphone call and peering into every private life was an effective, or socially desirable, way to keep Americans safe.

Though some attendees stood up for surveillance, casting it as a "necessary evil," they were the outliers in the crowd.

Almost everyone agreed that the post-9/11 surveillance apparatus is not going away anytime soon, and that the loss of privacy — from corporations tracking customers' purchasing habits, to living under the expanding gaze of security cameras and smartphones — is something younger generations aren't as worried about; in the social media age, they grow up acclimated to lives of full disclosure.

"They tend to be on the side of, 'I don't understand what the big deal is. I live my life online,'" Williams said.

> **'What is it about this idea of having unobserved space, or unobserved time, that we find valuable?'**
>
> **Kristian Williams**
> author and freelance writer

Prevention

Astoria City Councilor Drew Herzig, echoing writers on the topic, pointed out that as citizens have become more transparent to the government, the government has become less transparent to citizens.

What do they get in return? Is blanket surveillance effective at preventing crime? Doesn't seem to be, according to Williams.

For example, in the time since London installed tens of thousands of security cameras, crime hasn't decreased at all, he said. (But there has been a rise in criminals wearing masks while committing crimes.)

And since there aren't employees watching all of the security footage in real time, oftentimes the best law enforcement can do is identify and catch criminals after the fact by retracing their movements.

In other words, the surveillance information is often more useful for forensic rather than preventative purposes.

The same is true at the U.S. National Security Agency (whose unofficial motto is "Collect it all"). The agency gathers and stores such an overwhelming amount of electronic info that it is impossible to analyze every data point. But when the NSA knows what it's looking for, it can sift through its storage and nose it out.

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