

Technology Journal -- Books: After the Celebration -- - The Latest Crop of Books Warn of the Internet's Dark Side

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

It's the erosion of legal protections combined with the impact of new technologies that concerns [Jeffrey Rosen] in "The Unwanted Gaze," the least technical and most elegant of these four books. The book opens with U.S. White House intern Monica Lewinsky's view that one of the most invasive moments of Kenneth Starr's investigation into her relationship with President Clinton was the special prosecutor's decision to subpoena records of her book purchases. As Mr. Rosen puts it, Ms. Lewinsky might be "an improbable spokesperson for the virtues of reticence," but who would want their choices of books or anything else examined by some inquisitor?

Philosophers from Jeremy Bentham to Michel Foucault have illuminated the psychological and other dangers of the self-restraint that comes with the constant threat of observation. Mr. Rosen traces the idea back to Jewish law that developed a body of doctrine around the concept of "the injury caused by being seen." Jewish law recognized "that it is the uncertainty about whether or not we are being observed that forces us to lead more constricted lives and inhibits us from speaking and acting freely in private places."

[Robert Ellis Smith], author of "Ben Franklin's Web Site," was writing about privacy in his monthly newsletter long before the Internet brought the issue into sharp relief. Mr. Smith traces the place of privacy in American life to the Tythingmen, a 17th-century Puritan practice under which certain men took on the task of monitoring the behavior of 10 families.

FULL TEXT

The Hundredth Window

by Charles Jennings and Lori Fena

Free Press

Ben Franklin's Web Site

by Robert Ellis Smith

Privacy Journal

The Unwanted Gaze

by Jeffrey Rosen

Random House

Trust and Risk in Internet Commerce

by L. Jean Camp

MIT Press.

Books on new technologies follow a pattern. The first wave offers up a sense of unalloyed celebration with the authors awed by the possibilities invoked by anything new. The next set of books tend to link both the creative and destructive elements of the technology, looking at both what is gained and what is threatened.

With the Internet, we are now already in the midst of the third wave of books, cautionary tales that speak of dark and unintended consequences. This year has seen the publication of dozens of books on privacy as the realization dawns on everyone that a world of databases and limitless connections also means one in which the unexamined life is no longer lived by anybody.

Privacy is an easy issue to dismiss, particularly in Asia where government respect for individual rights is often grudging at best and people are fed myths about a culturally grounded lack of interest in it. These four books focus on the United States but they all offer a taste of what is possibly to come in Asia, where if anything the problem may be compounded by a near complete lack of legal guarantees that might stop governments and corporations from using technology to intrude into the stuff of people's souls.

It's the erosion of legal protections combined with the impact of new technologies that concerns Jeffrey Rosen in "The Unwanted Gaze," the least technical and most elegant of these four books. The book opens with U.S. White House intern Monica Lewinsky's view that one of the most invasive moments of Kenneth Starr's investigation into her relationship with President Clinton was the special prosecutor's decision to subpoena records of her book purchases. As Mr. Rosen puts it, Ms. Lewinsky might be "an improbable spokesperson for the virtues of reticence," but who would want their choices of books or anything else examined by some inquisitor?

Technologies that track our every purchase, keep an indelible record of what we write and read, even monitor what we look at on the Web can cast a pall over our lives. In this context, information, Mr. Rosen warns, is too often confused with knowledge, leading to a situation where the complexity of character is boiled down to a few bits of gossip plucked off the Internet.

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This uncertainty has long been exploited by governments as a way to intimidate their populations, and now the Internet has expanded the capacity for observation just as it has opened up flows of information.

Mr. Rosen's book covers an array of ways in which privacy is being undermined -- from the unintended consequences of sexual harassment laws that opened the door to massive intrusion by lawyers into private lives, to the electronic trails we all leave like so many wired snails. "The Hundredth Window" offers some solutions, but also

warns that there is a need for people to be extremely vigilant in protecting themselves.

Written by Charles Jennings and Lori Fen, the founders of the privacy certification company TRUSTe, this book jumbles together horror stories of corporate and government invasion with some useful ideas on self-protection. It pushes rather too intently for industry self-regulation when there is clearly a role for government as well.

There are many handy tips, but it's all a bit breathless, and perhaps overly anxious governments and companies can gather vast amounts of data, but most are quite inept at turning it into useful information. Companies have also realized that violating the privacy of customers on the Internet soon drives them away.

Robert Ellis Smith, author of "Ben Franklin's Web Site," was writing about privacy in his monthly newsletter long before the Internet brought the issue into sharp relief. Mr. Smith traces the place of privacy in American life to the Tythingmen, a 17th-century Puritan practice under which certain men took on the task of monitoring the behavior of 10 families.

This is still a practice common in Asia with the state-sanctioned busybodies that monitor neighborhoods in China and Vietnam, or Japan's deeply sinister and corrupt police force. Mr. Smith is clearly more in favor of government regulation than the authors of "The Hundredth Window," and approvingly lists the laws passed since the 1970s.

He also chastises the Clinton administration for allowing such a high level of self-regulation on the Internet while the European Union and other countries have been imposing tougher privacy requirements on companies. This is the most practical of these books, with its mix of readable history and sensible advice on what do about your own privacy.

"Trust and Risk in Internet Commerce" is an academic assessment of the state of the industry by L. Jean Camp, a professor at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. It goes beyond simple issues of privacy to examine cryptography, the legal aspects of online exchanges and various forms of Internet currency. It's filled with somewhat clunky writing that makes it a tough but worthwhile read for those looking for detailed knowledge of technical and legal aspects of risk online. The most interesting parts of the book are about online payments, ending in a final chapter that suggests that a catastrophic collapse of a payment system on the Internet should be expected because all currencies come to an end of their lives.

These works all paint a generally grim picture when it comes to privacy. Technology will not set us free but risks imprisoning us in the electronic equivalent of Mr. Bentham's Panopticon, in which inmates were always aware that they could be observed. Panopticons gradually send their residents mad.

Mr. Rosen wonders at the end of his book whether we are not building something similar for ourselves. "Someday," he writes, "we will look back with nostalgia on a society that still believed opacity was possible and was shocked to discover what happens when it is not."

Send comments to technology@awsj.com

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