

Mastering the universe

Description

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The Guardian newspaper recently ran a cover story on GCHQâ??s top-secret project Mastering the Internet. According to a helpful summary from wired.co.uk, it seems that the UK and US intelligence services have invoked a legal workaround that avoids domestic restrictions on intelligence gathering. The NSA in the USA can check up on UK citizens and GCHQ in the UK can do the same for US citizens. The project involves intercepting and storing everyoneâ??s Internet traffic for later search and filtering, within some time restrictions.



It seems thereâ??s lots to be fearful about: as well as drug dealers, paedophiles, terrorists, dictators, kidnappers, credit card fraud, and cyber hackers, we need to be afraid of being under constant surveillance, having our personal records scrutinised by others, losing civil liberties, incarceration without trial, victimisation by the state, etc.

In his *Utopia*, published in 1516, the Tudor statesman Thomas More emphasised human kindâ??s collective responsibility for building a better world: a republic with no aristocratic class and no ownership of property.

â??You see how it is â?? wherever you are, you always have to work. Thereâ??s never any excuse for idleness. There are also no wine-taverns, no ale-houses, no brothels, no opportunities for seduction, no secret meeting-places. **Everyone has his eye on you**, so youâ??re practically forced to get on with your job, and make some proper use of your spare timeâ?• (65).

Strip away Moreâ??s sanctimonious paternalism (and possibly his sarcasm) and you have something akin to libertarian civil society. Security and good behaviour is promoted by a sense of community and shared social responsibility, that can be abetted by environments and systems in which peopleâ??s behaviour is in view rather than hidden away.

In contemporary spatial terms the contrast is most acute if we compare (i) gated communities that lock their residents in monocultural enclaves that advertise thereâ??s something to be protected, with (ii) vibrant, diverse neighbourhoods with permeable boundaries and where people are *watching out for each other*. There are many studies that support the idea that there is a positive relationship between busy places and security, or at least a sense of security. (Look up â??gated communitiesâ?• on Google Scholar.)

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Feeling secure

How do people ***feel*** about security and all this covert mass surveillance? Thanks to improved capability in tracking drug dealers, paedophiles and terrorists â??we can all sleep a little more soundly in our beds,â?• according to the Guardian editorial. But the article also identifies confusion and ambivalence: these surveillance techniques need to be kept secret or the criminals will work out ways to circumvent them. Security also comes at a cost. All this surveillance is also kind of â??scaryâ?• according to some.

Security expert Bruce Schneier provides some sound advice about security in his book *Beyond Fear: Thinking Sensibly About Security in an Uncertain World.* The best way to feel safe is after all to â??live in nice neighbourhoods where people watch out for each other.â?•

> If someone is living in fear â?? whether itâ??s fear of the burglar on your block or the fanatical dictator half a planet away â?? itâ??s because she doesnâ??t understand how the game of security is played. She longs for a fortress, for a fairy-tale solution that will work forever after. Itâ??s a perfectly reasonable longing, and itâ??s because she thinks about security in terms of absolutes or magnifies her level of risk based on her experiences with the media, both news and fiction.
>
> Thereâ??s a smart way to be scared. It involves moving beyond fear and thinking sensibly about trade-offs. It involves looking beyond the newspaper headlines and getting a feel for the numbers: a feel for the threats and risks, and the efficacy of the countermeasures. It involves making sensible security trade-offs. The smart way to be scared is to be streetwise. (p.278)

Feardie werds*

Fear is a word that circulates almost independently of what people feel. We are exhorted to be afraid of what all this surveillance or lack of it might do to us. Like a number of mood words (eg happiness and anger), *fear* circulates. According to psychologists Lutz and White, such emotional words fit within â??a strategy for defending a groupâ??s preferred type of social organizationâ?• (420). Emotional words are â??socially shaped and socially shapingâ?• (417). Perhaps changing our words will change the way we

feel, or the kind of society we live in.

* Scots for *fear words*.

Glossary

- GCHQ: Government Communications Headquarters in the United Kingdom
- NSA: National Security Agency in the United States of America

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Notes

- In spite of his promotion of democracy and communalism Moreâ??s dream was of a society in which everyone knows their place. Human kind is basically untrustworthy and lives under the sway of divine judgment.
- Also see Panoptic man, Accidental people, and Urban occupy.

Category

1. Society

Tags

1. security
2. utopia

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