

OTTAWA CANADA - Footprints in the Archive: Self-Censorship, Paranoia, and Distrust on the Grid (2015)

Democratic citizens identified as netizens today are learning hard new realities. While the general practice of leaving digital footprints in online activity may have been a given prior to the 2012 Edward Snowden revelations, select variables that have come into play since for the average Internet user lead to disconcerting results.

While the corporate government media line is there to conclude that only those persons wishing to hide something would want to get off the grid, the truth is that average people around the world using the Internet feel like they have been violated, that their rights to certain inalienable freedoms have been compromised. Consequently, these average Internet users are working to limit the size of digital footprint they leave on the grid that, apparently, is permanently archived for governmental purposes now and into the future.

Wary democratic citizens have little recourse today knowing that every communicative move they make through their phones and online is being tracked and archived. This activity is leading to two particular acts on the part of communications today, largely in areas of social media but including public commentary online: self-censorship and discernment in dissent. Posting on the Internet now requires the poster to question whether a post is worth government big data tracking and assimilation, whether a post is worth further repercussions than simple momentary ostracization in a forum, and whether a post is worth eventual attempt to justify in unforeseen circumstances at a later date.

This self-censorship has dire consequences for the marketplace of ideas. It affects variables by researchers seeking to find patterns in data communications since what someone may want to say is not said. While this may seem innocuous at the single-user level, large proponents of dissent in participation are not an unreal expectation. Furthermore, matters of dissent toward authority end up being closeted and unexpressed with commentators aware of the risk involved in words being used against them at a later date or prospectively haunting them when least expected.

While it is too late for everyone and everything that has taken place to alter prior presence on the grid to date, it is not too late for any behavior modifications noted herein. Questions may remain as to whether getting off the grid throws up a red flag for authorities seeking to find abruptive participation patterns and consequently leading to possible inspection of the archive to date for an individual, and certainly some of these dynamics may lead to person paranoia not justified or warranted.

With the prevalence of new media technologies at the everyday appliance level for most Western denizens, emergence of resistance technologies and applications is on the rise. While not necessarily removing users from the grid but perhaps reducing or helping reduce their footprints while on the grid, questions still remain as to how to resolve matters of government-planted software-compliant backdoors beyond the user's knowledge and overall integrity of applications claiming to anonymize.

These observations have led individual Internet users to conclude that they are responsible for their own actions and words – not a completely bad thing. Yet, while users may be forced to feel more accountable, volumes of 'hate speech' in posts on online media sites and personal blogs still persist and exponentially seem to grow. This suggested increase in individual trust overrides distrust of the system, whereby emboldened users who feel their freedoms and rights are offended by government surveillance may programmatically be publicly resisting control in their strong emotional reactions, often filled with hate, and largely, for 'the Other.'

Exploration of online action, change, reaction, power, and powerlessness in the wake of the Snowden revelations should be at the forefront of traditional media research initiatives, yet media liaised with corporate government objectives fail to assess the matter objectively, almost as if immune to it. It is now up to innovative emerging applications and related trustworthy services provided by new media ventures dedicated to democratic sociopolitical objectives to restore trust in the digital archive and re-establish faith in the democratic processes to their rightful place in the virtual alongside what is left of them in the real.
