



Privacy and Security in the Age of Snowden: Fletcher Students and Faculty Seek the Appropriate Balance

In late January, Fletcher students and faculty gathered for a spirited discussion on the appropriate balance between privacy and security in the age of Edward Snowden, NSA surveillance, and societies increasingly built around the internet. Participants wrestled to both define the importance of privacy and security and propose meaningful responses for businesses most affected by controversial surveillance activities.

This was the second in a series of “Fletcher Reads the Newspaper” discussions, hosted by the Institute for Business in a Global Context (IBGC) and supported by the Hitachi Center for Technology and International Affairs. The events convene Fletcher students and faculty for interdisciplinary discussions on pressing current events and issues.

The discussion was moderated by Bhaskar Chakravorti, Senior Associate Dean for International Business and Finance. He kicked off the evening by noting the delicacy the two issues required.

“Most of us agree that there should be some balance between privacy and security,” Dean Chakravorti said. “The challenge, however, is finding the appropriate point in between.”

In seeking to find this balance, participants started by debating the relative merits of privacy and security. Carolyn Gideon, Assistant Professor of International Communication and Technology Policy, began with the argument that there is no well-defined right to privacy in the constitution, though she did acknowledge legal precedent would lend some support to such a right.

Daniel Drezner, Professor of International Politics, for his part, turned the tables by questioning the use of security as a justification for privacy violations.

“To talk about this as a security/privacy issue is a bit disingenuous, because there is no evidence that [these surveillance programs have] actually improved security,” he said.

Panelists also emphasized that, while the circumstances might be different, the fundamental issues under discussion were not in any way new.

“This is not a new story,” Gideon said. “While the details may be new, we’ve had this discussion before: from debates in the 1980s between the US and Europe over different approaches to privacy to the post-9/11 controversy about the collection of biometric data in airports.”

“The tension we face here is a tension classic to American society, a tension between protecting the American people and protecting our rights,” William Martell, Associate Professor of International Security Studies, added.

Given the fact competing forces of security and privacy are not a new phenomenon, participants also wondered whether it was in fact an issue of concern for the American people. Gideon argued it wasn't.

“The reality is that most people in the US don't care,” she said. “The elites are trying to tell Americans they should care, but most people simply don't.”

Questioning this assertion, Martell countered.

“Is it that the American people don't care or is it that they sense they can't do anything about it?” he said.

This description of a sense of helplessness seemed to resonate with many in the audience.

A second-year MALD student argued that certain segments of society, including many well-represented in the Fletcher community, were in fact very concerned about apparent violations of privacy rights.

“We need to think about what this means for issues relevant to our community specifically – academics with confidential data, journalists with sources,” the student said. “There are communities that care a whole lot, for good reason, and that matters.”

Turning away from the domestic scene, Drezner urged attendees to consider the implications of surveillance programs on the credibility of the United States in the international community.

“The US has been unique in being able to espouse one set of values, while simultaneously, in some cases, acting contrary to them,” he said.

He went on to argue that the world's tolerance for contradictions between American words and actions is growing thin.

“If it were the first time this happened in recent years, the US would be fine,” he said. “But it isn't. The US has suffered multiple blows to its standing since 9/11, starting with the failed search for WMDs in Iraq.”

Panelists agreed, noting the United States' loss of moral high ground risked allowing other, less democratic states to defend their own robust surveillance programs, which may be put to questionable uses, with greater ease.

Turning to business interests, Drezner made it clear the surveillance scandal was – and continues to be – a very serious issue for US internet and telecommunications firm. In the aftermath of the revelations, public perception of key US corporations such as Google and Facebook painted the companies as complicit in the far-reaching US surveillance programs, doling out a serious “branding hit.”

Dean Chakravorti closed the evening by asking students to provide recommendations to US internet companies needing to respond to US surveillance programs.

“What should Eric Schmidt, Google’s chairman, do?” he asked.

Students returned with a range of suggestions, including proposals to give individuals access to the information collected about them and implement broad public education campaigns to ensure all users are aware of what information may be collected and know how to protect their privacy online.

Looking to the future, most participants seemed pessimistic. They agreed, whatever the appropriate tradeoff between privacy and security, there was good reason for Americans to be skeptical of their government’s ability to balance them appropriately. Central to this problem was the system of oversight within the US government not functioning as originally intended.

Drezner summed it up by pointing out what he saw as a central systemic flaw.

“Checks and balances don’t work anymore,” he said. “That much is clear.”

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