THE RUTHERFORD INSTITUTE
IT'S OUR JOB TO MAKE THE GOVERNMENT PLAY BY THE RULES OF THE CONSTITUTION

John Whitehead's Commentary



Orwell's Nightmare: The NSA and Google—Big Brother Meets Big Business

By John W. Whitehead

May 12, 2014

"The Google services and apps that we interact with on a daily basis aren't the company's main product: They are the harvesting machines that dig up and process the stuff that Google really sells: for-profit intelligence."—Journalist Yasha Levine

"We know where you are. We know where you've been. We can more or less know what you're thinking about."—former Google CEO Eric Schmidt

What would happen if the most powerful technology company in the world and the largest clandestine spying agency in the world joined forces?

No need to wonder. Just look around you. It's happened already. Thanks to an insidious partnership between Google and the National Security Agency (NSA) that grows more invasive and more subtle with every passing day, "we the people" have become little more than data consumer commodities to be bought, sold and paid for over and over again.

With every smartphone we buy, every GPS device we install, every Twitter, Facebook, and Google account we open, every frequent buyer card we use for purchases—whether at the grocer's, the yogurt shop, the airlines or the department store, and every credit and debit card we use to pay for our transactions, we're helping Corporate America build a dossier for its government counterparts on who we know, what we think, how we spend our money, and how we spend our time.

What's worse, this for-profit surveillance scheme, far larger than anything the NSA could capture just by tapping into our phone calls, is made possible by our consumer dollars and our cooperation. All those disclaimers you scroll though without reading them, the ones written in minute font, only to quickly click on the "Agree" button at the end so you can get to the next step—downloading software, opening up a social media account, adding a new app to your phone or computer: those signify your written consent to having your activities monitored, recorded and shared.

It's not just the surveillance you *consent* to that's being shared with the government, however. It's the very technology you happily and unquestioningly use which is being hardwired to give the government easy access to your activities.

In this way, Congress can pass all the legislation it wants—it will have no real effect on the NSA's activities—because the NSA no longer needs to dirty its hands by spying on Americans' phone, email and internet activities, and the government can absolve itself of any direct wrongdoing. They can go straight to the source, as evidenced by a Freedom of Information Act request detailing the close relationship between Google higher-ups Eric Schmidt and Sergey Brin and NSA Director Gen. Keith Alexander. With Google in its hip pocket, the NSA can just bypass any legislative restrictions dreamed up to appease the electorate and buy their way into a surveillance state.

The government's motives aren't too difficult to understand—money, power, control—but what do corporate giants like Google stand to gain from colluding with Big Brother? Money, power, control. As privacy and security expert Bruce Schneier observed, "The main focus of massive Internet companies and government agencies both still largely align: to keep us all under constant surveillance. When they bicker, it's mostly role-playing designed to keep us blasé about what's really going on."

While one billion people use Google every day, none of them pay to utilize Google's services. However, there's a good reason that Google doesn't charge for its services, and it has nothing to do with magnanimity, generosity, altruism, or munificence. If as the old adage warns, there's no such thing as a free lunch, then what does Google get out of the relationship? Simple: Google gets us.

It turns out that *we* are Soylent Green. The 1973 film of the same name, starring Charlton Heston and Edward G. Robinson, is set in 2022 in an overpopulated, polluted, starving New York City whose inhabitants depend on synthetic foods manufactured by the Soylent Corporation for survival. Heston plays a policeman investigating a murder, who then discovers the grisly truth about what the wafer, soylent green—the principal source of nourishment for a starved population—is really made of. "It's people. Soylent Green is made out of people," declares Heston's character. "They're making our food out of people. Next thing they'll be breeding us like cattle for food."

Oh, how right he was. Soylent Green is indeed people, or in our case, Soylent Green is our own personal data, repossessed, repackaged and used by corporations and the government to entrap us. In this way, we're being bred like cattle but not for food—rather, we're being bred for our data. That's the secret to Corporate America's success.

Google, for example, has long enjoyed a relationship with clandestine agencies such as the CIA and NSA, which use Google's search-technology for scanning and sharing various intelligence. The technology leviathan turns a profit by processing, trading, and marketing products based upon our personal information, including our relationships, daily activities, personal beliefs, and personalities. Thus, behind the pleasant glow of the computer screen lies a leviathan menace, an

intricate system of data collection which transforms all Americans into a string of data, to be added, manipulated, or deleted based upon the whims of those in control.

Take, for example, Google's Street View program, which gives a fully immersive street level view of towns across the world. The program was constructed by Google Street View cars outfitted with 360 degree cameras, which seemed a neat idea to many people, most of whom didn't realize that the cars were not only taking pictures of all residential and commercial districts which they drove through, but were also "siphoning loads of personally identifiable data from people's Wi-Fi connections all across the world," including emails, medical records, and any other electronic documents that were not encrypted.

Even the most seemingly benign Google program, Gmail, has been one of the most astoundingly successful surveillance programs ever concocted by a state or corporate entity. Journalist Yasha Levine explains:

"All communication was subject to deep linguistic analysis; conversations were parsed for keywords, meaning, and even tone; individuals were matched to real identities using contact information stored in a user's Gmail address book; attached documents were scraped for intel — that info was then cross-referenced with previous email interactions and combined with stuff gleaned from other Google services, as well as third-party sources…"

Google then creates profiles on Gmail users, based upon "concepts and topics discussed in email, as well as email attachments [including] the content of websites that users have visited; demographic information — including income, sex, race, marital status; geographic information; psychographic information — personality type, values, attitudes, interests, and lifestyle interests; previous searches users have made; information about documents a user viewed and or edited by the users; browsing activity; previous purchases."

Even if one isn't using Gmail themselves, but merely contacting a Gmail user, that person is subject to this mass collection and analysis of personal data. Google has gone so far as to disingenuously argue that "people who used Internet services for communication had 'no legitimate expectation of privacy' — and thus anyone who emailed with Gmail users had given 'implied consent' for Google to intercept and analyze their email exchange."

What Google's vast acquisition and analysis of information indicates is that we are entering what some have called an age of infopolitics, in which the human person is broken down into data sets to be collated and analyzed, and used for a variety of purposes, including marketing, propaganda, and the squelching of dissent. As philosopher Colin Koopman notes, we may soon find ourselves in a more efficient version of the McCarthy era, in which one's personal beliefs or associations become fodder for the rising corporate surveillance state.

Email, social media, and GPS are just the tip of the iceberg, however. Google has added to its payroll the best and brightest minds in the fields of military defense, robotics (including humanoid robotics), defense, surveillance, machine learning, artificial intelligence, web-controlled household appliances (such as Nest thermostats), and self-driving cars. As journalist

Carole Cadwalladr's predicts, "The future, in ways we can't even begin to imagine, will be Google's."

Toward this end, Google has been working towards what one investor called "a Manhattan project of AI [artificial intelligence]." For those who remember their history, the Manhattan Project was a top-secret, multi-agency, multi-billion-dollar, military-driven government project aimed at building the first atom bombs. This project not only spawned the nuclear bombs used at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but it also ushered in a nuclear arms race that, to this day, puts humanity on the brink of annihilation.

No less powerful and potentially destructive to the human race are modern-day surveillance and robotic technologies, manufactured by corporations working in tandem with government agencies. These are the building blocks of the global electronic concentration camp encircling us all, and Google, in conjunction with the NSA, has set itself up as a formidable warden.

The question, when all is said and done, is where will all this technology take us? It's a conundrum I explore at length in my book *A Government of Wolves: The Emerging American Police State*, which looks to film, fiction and art as indicators of the police state that now surrounds us, brought about with the help of the government and its corporate partners.

It won't be long before we find ourselves, much like Edward G. Robinson's character in *Soylent Green,* looking back on the past with longing, back to an age where we could speak to whom we wanted, buy what we wanted, think what we wanted without those thoughts, words and activities being tracked, processed and stored by corporate giants such as Google, sold to government agencies such as the NSA and CIA, and used against us by militarized police with their army of futuristic technologies.

Then again, George Orwell's description of the world of *1984* is as apt a description of today's world as I've ever seen: "You had to live—did live, from habit that became instinct—in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized."

WC: 2054