

Thoughts on George Orwell

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31 May 2013



Since I posted the essay about “Big Data vs. Big Brother” I have received quite a few interesting and well-reasoned comments about the whole issue of government or corporate intrusion via access to large amounts of analyzable personal data. Like any controversial issue the comments graphed like a standard Bell Curve with strong supporters and strong objectors occupying the thin tails of the curve, and a large population of folks in the middle who were willing to consider the personal value of analytics.

Even though I am a technologist of sorts, I am really more of a – for lack of a better term – *Humanist*. I’m much more interested in the human impact of technology than I am in the technology itself. I do know how it works because I have to, but to me that’s like looking at the moving parts of a watch without any concept of the valuable of time.

So when the comments began to pour in I turned to the various resources that I read on a regular basis and began to look for insight. I thought about the various trips I’ve taken in the last few years outside of North America and about the impact of technology on the developing world. And I thought about the disadvantage that so many people suffer with because they do not have access to certain life-changing technologies.

So let me make a few observations about technology, specifically about such things as Big Data, analytics, cloud solutions, and the human impact that they can have – especially down at the bottom of the human economic pyramid.

The idea of unfettered government or corporate access to personal information is anathema to most people in a free society because of the potential for abuse. We bristle when we hear about our purchase histories being scrutinized or about our viewing or listening habits being analyzed for the purposes of targeted advertising. The idea of biometric capture sends many people into apoplectic fits because of the personal and potentially physically intrusive nature of biometric data capture. The popular TV show, “Person of Interest” is about a Big Brother-like machine built by some shadowy government entity that has the ability to tap into all surveillance cameras and data sources worldwide. Originally designed for secret (most likely illegal) surveillance, the machine (and that’s what they call it, “the machine”) has now been co-opted by a small team of individuals who use it to predict violent acts and prevent them from happening. The show, then, is about people who use the technology purely for good – although I’m sure that constitutional lawyers must have a field day debating the pros and cons of such things.

But I digress. Even though we enjoy certain freedoms in our society we become twitchy when we feel that government (or retailers) is becoming too intrusive in our lives. However, we all still carry a variety of forms of identification including credit cards, RFID-enabled passports and drivers licenses, social security cards, birth certificates, student IDs, and so on. We don't give them a second thought because they are required for entering into any form of transaction that requires proof positive of identification. You can't buy a car, a house, or any other large capital item without identification; you can't exercise your right to vote; you can't receive social security and other retirement benefits; you can't drive that new car you just bought; you can't go on vacation, check into a hotel, get on an airplane or train, buy theater tickets, or in many cases enjoy an alcoholic beverage with some form of legally-acceptable identification. We accept that fact because it helps to reduce fraudulent activity and protect our rights as citizens.

But let's now shift gears for a moment and think about the people I meet and deal with on a regular basis in Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia. These are people who have no legal form of identification whatsoever, a fact that has far-reaching implications. Consider this: roughly 98% of people in the developed world have birth certificates, according to UNESCO; in the developing world, however, 40% or more of children being born today are not registered – *which means that for all intents and purposes they do not exist. THEY DO NOT EXIST.*



Why is this so important? Well, just think about the things you can't do if you don't have some form of legitimate personal identification. For example, many of the people I routinely deal with in Africa don't put money in banks, because they can't open an account – because they have no

ID. As a result the banking sector suffers. And what about the people who have multiple IDs? They number in the millions and routinely bilk governments out of tax revenue, defraud pension programs, and generally serve as a burden on the system – not to mention the impact they have on taxes.

One of the important technological innovations that has gained significant ground in recent years is biometrics – the ability to find and record biological “markers” that uniquely identify people. These include such things as retinal scans¹, digital fingerprints, facial scans, ear and lip mapping, even identifiably-unique walking patterns. In combination with RFID, low-cost, ubiquitous broadband networks, cloud storage and processing, and analytics, the ability to identify individuals has never been easier.

Is there a potential here for abuse and personal intrusion? Of course – there always is with new technology. Privacy concerns notwithstanding, however, this kind of technology partnership represents an opportunity the likes of which we rarely see. Think about a technological solution that can effectively eliminate voter fraud, provide positive individual identification that cannot be denied, deliver safe and reliable healthcare, support the banking industry, and provide the basis for enhanced human rights, and I think we have something that is worth exploring.

Thanks for reading.

¹ A participant in a talk I gave a few months ago about the use of RFID and other technologies was taken aback when I mentioned retinal scanning as a viable alternative to fingerprinting. “What did you say?!?” she asked me. “Retinal scanning?” I responded. “Oh – whew. She replied, relieved. I thought you said RECTAL scanning!”