

The Privacy Advocates: Resisting the Spread of Surveillance.

Colin J. Bennett. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008. 259 pp. \$28.00.

In the information age, most of us are aware that our movements on the Internet are easily monitored. To protect our privacy, we may set up firewalls, search for spyware, and remove cookies from our computers. We protect our personal information by hiding our passwords and changing them regularly, checking our credit reports for identity theft, and making sure that nobody is looking over our shoulders when we get money from the cash machine. Although such measures do a lot to make us feel safer, they remedy only a few of the issues that ought to concern us. The number of ways in which our personal data, our movements, our preferences, and our behaviors are monitored, aggregated, and marketed is stunning, according to Bennett, which should make us all grateful for the efforts of the groups he terms the "privacy advocates." This book delves into the complex community of non-governmental organizations, governmental groups, and corporate interests that challenge the increasingly intrusive ways in which our personal lives are monitored, commoditized, and exploited for the various ends of corporate and government interests. With detailed accounts of the individuals and organizations involved in protecting our personal data, this book calls attention to and puts structure around a population of disparate organizations involved in a common cause with far-reaching implications.

The Privacy Advocates is the result of the author's in-depth, semi-structured interviews with more than thirty advocates across the world, as well as his thorough review of archival data. Bennett presents not so much an analysis of these advocates as a taxonomy, focusing in turn on the issues around privacy and the groups involved, descriptions of specific strategies and conflicts, and a discussion of the interaction of groups of advocates through loosely connected networks. Bennett's goal is to better understand the population of privacy advocates—whom he classifies not as social movement participants but as members of a transnational advocacy network—and thus "to determine whether the conditions are present for a different form of social movement or transnational activist network to develop" (p. xii). Although Bennett never fully answers his own question, the cases he presents will be of interest to any scholar interested in social movement theory. Network scholars, particularly those interested in network dynamics, and scholars interested in issues around corporate social responsibility and ethics will also find inspiration in the cases presented in *The Privacy Advocates*.

In chapter 1, Bennett frames the problem of privacy as a social problem and reviews how the cluster of issues surrounding privacy have been treated in the academic literature. This question is of some consequence, as Bennett notes that there is no common working definition of privacy. Rather, privacy can be conceived of variously as a matter of spatial delineation, shielding specific behaviors from external interference, protecting individual decision-making ability,

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and controlling personal information, and each definition carries separate implications for public policy. Similarly, defining privacy as control over one's own personal information rather than protection from surveillance has significant ramifications for the range of issues addressed and tactics employed by different privacy advocates. The complexity involved in defining the concept itself is one of the factors that inhibit the development of a common social identity among privacy advocates and, consequently, a social movement.

Chapters 2 and 3 address the groups and individuals involved in privacy advocacy, respectively. Supplemented by a three-page list of privacy advocacy organizations, this section provides a detailed landscape of the players involved, including a brief history and description of the activities of each. Bennett delves into the backgrounds, qualifications, and motivations of individual advocates and categorizes them by their respective role identities—advocate/activist, researcher, consultant, technologist, journalist, and artist—which delineate both commonalities and differences among various actors. The catalog of advocacy organizations describes the range of forms they take and many ways they identify themselves. Bennett notes that organizations focused on privacy as a stand-alone issue find it difficult to sustain momentum but that those tied to broader questions of civil liberties, human rights, or consumer protection seem to gain more traction over the long term. Although linking to other issues makes the work of privacy advocates more impactful, it also seems to introduce distinctions that prevent the development of a collective identity. United only by their belief in the importance of privacy, it is difficult to envision many of these disparate actors and organizations working together, which seems to inhibit further the emergence of a full-fledged social movement.

Chapter 4 discusses the range of strategies that privacy advocates employ to promote their cause, including fact-based reporting, raising awareness through the deployment of cultural symbols, accountability politics, and leverage politics. These tactics are brought to life in chapter 5, which provides a fascinating and rich description of the work of privacy advocates in protesting national censuses in the Netherlands and Germany, resistance to national identity cards in Australia, the U.K., France, and Japan, and several examples in which advocates protected individual consumer information and the privacy of electronic communication in the United States. The success of privacy advocates is apparent through the increasing frequency and intensity of such campaigns, as demonstrated in Bennett's vignettes. Although these accounts highlight the ability of various advocacy groups to work effectively in concert, Bennett makes special note of the terrific tensions that exist within the advocacy community because of the range of actors involved and the strategic choices they are forced to make about issues such as financing and breadth of scope. These chapters dovetail nicely with the sixth chapter, which deals with the network of privacy advocacy parties and the ways in which they interact. Bennett describes conferences, campaigns, and coalitions that have united different players over the years but concludes that such cooperation is always

short-lived, as various actors' agendas and interests change. The chapter ends with Bennett once again questioning whether this loosely joined group of activists can be called a social movement.

The book ends by explicitly considering the nature of privacy advocacy: Is this a social movement? Could it become a social movement? Does the lack of an identifiable social movement reflect a failure on the part of the advocates, or is it "the way it has to be" (p. 200)? Drawing on Tarrow (1988), Bennett analyzes the fit between the advocacy network and the theoretical concept of a social movement. Although he finds that privacy advocates work toward a contentious, collective challenge, share a common purpose, exhibit solidarity and a collective—albeit fragile and fleeting—identity, and engender sustained contentious politics, as Tarrow's framework suggests, he is still reluctant to label his subject a social movement. This is because, Bennett argues, few of the advances in privacy protection are the "result of concerted grassroots pressure . . . it is still generally an elitist issue within government, business, and civil society" (p. 207). He attributes the failure to develop a grassroots movement to the difficulty in mobilizing resources and the "different" nature of the issue of privacy, which is abstract and multifaceted and whose effects are often invisible, and concludes with advocates' own opinions of their chances for creating a broad-based movement in the future.

The story of the privacy advocates is, in part, the story of Bennett himself. A political scientist, Bennett has written on issues of privacy since the mid-1990s and acknowledges his involvement in the cause of privacy in his introduction. His treatment of his informants is generally unbiased by his support of their cause, however, except in his final chapter, which seems to suffer from the author's closeness to his subject. The book may have been even more impactful had Bennett explicitly analyzed the ways in which individual and group experience and focus have an impact on the issues that are problematized, the tactics that are employed, and the ability of these disparate groups to develop a coherent social identity. By doing so, the author may have been able to abstract away from the case of the privacy advocates and draw more generalizable conclusions. Perhaps this is to our benefit, however, as the questions left unanswered at the end of *The Privacy Advocates* are likely to provide inspiration for much further inquiry.

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REFERENCE

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