

# Glenn Greenwald on Why Privacy Matters (Transcript)

## **Glenn Greenwald**

*In this searing talk at a TED conference [October 2014], Glenn Greenwald makes the case for why you need to care about privacy, even if you're "not doing anything you need to hide."*

## **Glenn Greenwald – Journalist**

There is an entire genre of YouTube videos devoted to an experience which I am certain that everyone in this room has had. It entails an individual who, thinking they're alone, engages in some expressive behavior — wild singing, gyrating dancing, some mild sexual activity — only to discover that, in fact, they are not alone, that there is a person watching and lurking, the discovery of which causes them to immediately cease what they were doing in horror. The sense of shame and humiliation in their face is palpable. It's the sense of, "*This is something I'm willing to do only if no one else is watching.*"

This is the crux of the work on which I have been singularly focused for the last 16 months, the question of why privacy matters, a question that has arisen in the context of a global debate, enabled by the revelations of Edward Snowden that the United States and its partners, unbeknownst to the entire world, has converted the Internet, once heralded as an unprecedented tool of liberation and democratization, into an unprecedented zone of mass, indiscriminate surveillance.

There is a very common sentiment that arises in this debate, even among people who are uncomfortable with mass surveillance, which says that there is no real harm that comes from this large-scale invasion because only people who are engaged in bad acts have a reason to want to hide and to care about their privacy.

This worldview is implicitly grounded in the proposition that there are two kinds of people in the world: good people and bad people. Bad people are those who plot terrorist attacks or who engage in violent criminality and therefore have reasons to want to hide what they're doing, have reasons to care about their privacy.

But by contrast, good people are people who go to work, come home, raise their children, watch television. They use the Internet not to plot bombing attacks but to read the news or exchange recipes or to plan their kids' Little League games, and those people are doing nothing wrong and therefore have nothing to hide and no reason to fear the government monitoring them.

The people who are actually saying that are engaged in a very extreme act of self-deprecation. What they're really saying is, *"I have agreed to make myself such a harmless and unthreatening and uninteresting person that I actually don't fear having the government know what it is that I'm doing."* This mindset has found what I think is its purest expression in a 2009 interview with the longtime CEO of Google, Eric Schmidt, who, when asked about all the different ways his company is causing invasions of privacy for hundreds of millions of people around the world, said this: He said, *"If you're doing something that you don't want other people to know, maybe you shouldn't be doing it in the first place."*

Now, there's all kinds of things to say about that mentality, the first of which is that the people who say that, who say that privacy isn't really important, they don't actually believe it, and the way you know that they don't actually believe it is that while they say with their words that privacy doesn't matter, with their actions, they take all kinds of steps to safeguard their privacy. They put passwords on their email and their social media accounts, they put locks on their bedroom and bathroom doors, all steps designed to prevent other people from entering what they consider their private realm and knowing what it is that they don't want other people to know.

The very same Eric Schmidt, the CEO of Google, ordered his employees at Google to cease speaking with the online Internet magazine CNET after CNET published an article full of personal, private information about Eric Schmidt, which it obtained exclusively through Google searches and using other Google products.

This same division can be seen with the CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, who in an infamous interview in 2010 pronounced that privacy is no longer a "social norm." Last year, Mark Zuckerberg and his new wife purchased not only their own house but also all four adjacent houses in Palo Alto for a total of \$30 million in order to ensure that they enjoyed a zone of privacy that prevented other people from monitoring what they do in their personal lives.

Over the last 16 months, as I've debated this issue around the world, every single time somebody has said to me, *"I don't really worry about invasions of privacy because I don't have anything to hide."* I always say the same thing to them. I get out a pen, I write down my email address. I say, *"Here's my email address. What I want you to do when you get home is email me the passwords to all of your email accounts, not just the nice, respectable work one in your name, but all of them, because I want to be able to just troll through what it is you're doing online, read what I want to read and publish whatever I find interesting. After all, if you're not a bad person, if you're doing nothing wrong, you should have nothing to hide."*

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Not a single person has taken me up on that offer. I check and — I check that email account religiously all the time. It's a very desolate place. And there's a reason for that, which is that we as human beings, even those of us who in words disclaim the importance of our own privacy, instinctively understand the profound importance of it.

It is true that as human beings, we're social animals, which means we have a need for other people to know what we're doing and saying and thinking, which is why we voluntarily publish information about ourselves online.

But equally essential to what it means to be a free and fulfilled human being is to have a place that we can go and be free of the judgmental eyes of other people. There's a reason why we seek that out, and our reason is that all of us — not just terrorists and criminals, all of us — have things to hide.

There are all sorts of things that we do and think that we're willing to tell our physician or our lawyer or our psychologist or our spouse or our best friend that we would be mortified for the rest of the world to learn. We make judgments every single day about the kinds of things that we say and think and do that we're willing to have other people know, and the kinds of things that we say and think and do that we don't want anyone else to know about. People can very easily in words claim that they don't value their privacy, but their actions negate the authenticity of that belief.

Now, there's a reason why privacy is so craved universally and instinctively. It isn't just a reflexive movement like breathing air or drinking water.

The reason is that when we're in a state where we can be monitored, where we can be watched, our behavior changes dramatically. The range of behavioral options that we consider when we think we're being watched severely reduce. This is just a fact of human nature that has been recognized in social science and in literature and in religion and in virtually every field of discipline. There are dozens of psychological studies that prove that when somebody knows that they might be watched, the behavior they engage in is vastly more conformist and compliant.

Human shame is a very powerful motivator, as is the desire to avoid it, and that's the reason why people, when they're in a state of being watched, make decisions not that are the byproduct of their own agency but that are about the expectations that others have of them or the mandates of societal orthodoxy.

This realization was exploited most powerfully for pragmatic ends by the 18th-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who set out to resolve an important problem ushered in by the industrial age, where, for the first time, institutions had become so large and centralized that they were no longer able to monitor and therefore control each one of their individual members, and the solution that he devised was an architectural design originally intended to be implemented in prisons that he called the **panopticon**, the primary attribute of which was the construction of an enormous tower in the center of the institution where whoever controlled the institution could at any moment watch any of the inmates, although they couldn't watch all of them at all times.

And crucial to this design was that the inmates could not actually see into the panopticon, into the tower, and so they never knew if they were being watched or even when. And what made him so excited about this discovery was that that would mean that the prisoners would have to assume that they were being watched at any given moment, which would be the ultimate enforcer for obedience and compliance.

The 20th-century French philosopher Michel Foucault realized that that model could be used not just for prisons but for every institution that seeks to control human behavior: schools, hospitals, factories,

workplaces. And what he said was that this mindset, this framework discovered by Bentham, was the key means of societal control for modern, Western societies, which no longer need the overt weapons of tyranny — punishing or imprisoning or killing dissidents, or legally compelling loyalty to a particular party — because mass surveillance creates a prison in the mind that is a much more subtle though much more effective means of fostering compliance with social norms or with social orthodoxy, much more effective than brute force could ever be.

The most iconic work of literature about surveillance and privacy is the George Orwell novel “**1984**,” which we all learn in school, and therefore it’s almost become a cliché. In fact, whenever you bring it up in a debate about surveillance, people instantaneously dismiss it as inapplicable, and what they say is, “Oh, well in ‘1984,’ there were monitors in people’s homes, they were being watched at every given moment, and that has nothing to do with the surveillance state that we face.”

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That is an actual fundamental misapprehension of the warnings that Orwell issued in “**1984**.” The warning that he was issuing was about a surveillance state not that monitored everybody at all times, but where people were aware that they could be monitored at any given moment.

Here is how Orwell’s narrator, Winston Smith, described the surveillance system that they faced: “*There was, of course, no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment.*” He went on to say, “*At any rate, they could plug in your wire whenever they wanted to. 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.*”

The Abrahamic religions similarly posit that there’s an invisible, all-knowing authority who, because of its omniscience, always watches whatever you’re doing, which means you never have a private moment, the ultimate enforcer for obedience to its dictates.

What all of these seemingly disparate works recognize, the conclusion that they all reach, is that a society in which people can be monitored at all times is a society that breeds conformity and obedience and submission, which is why every tyrant, the most overt to the most subtle, craves that system.

Conversely, even more importantly, it is a realm of privacy, the ability to go somewhere where we can think and reason and interact and speak without the judgmental eyes of others being cast upon us, in which creativity and exploration and dissent exclusively reside, and that is the reason why, when we allow a society to exist in which we’re subject to constant monitoring, we allow the essence of human freedom to be severely crippled.

The last point I want to observe about this mindset, the idea that only people who are doing something wrong have things to hide and therefore reasons to care about privacy, is that it entrenches two very destructive messages, two destructive lessons, the first of which is that the only people who care about privacy, the only people who will seek out privacy, are by definition bad people. This is a conclusion that we should have all kinds of reasons for avoiding, the most important of which is that when you say, “*somebody who is doing bad things*,” you probably mean things like plotting a terrorist attack or engaging in violent criminality, a much narrower conception of what people who wield power mean

when they say, “*doing bad things.*” For them, “doing bad things” typically means doing something that poses meaningful challenges to the exercise of our own power.

The other really destructive and, I think, even more insidious lesson that comes from accepting this mindset is there’s an implicit bargain that people who accept this mindset have accepted, and that bargain is this: If you’re willing to render yourself sufficiently harmless, sufficiently unthreatening to those who wield political power, then and only then can you be free of the dangers of surveillance. It’s only those who are dissidents, who challenge power, who have something to worry about.

There are all kinds of reasons why we should want to avoid that lesson as well. You may be a person who, right now, doesn’t want to engage in that behavior, but at some point in the future you might. Even if you’re somebody who decides that you never want to, the fact that there are other people who are willing to and able to resist and be adversarial to those in power — dissidents and journalists and activists and a whole range of others — is something that brings us all collective good that we should want to preserve.

Equally critical is that the measure of how free a society is is not how it treats its good, obedient, compliant citizens, but how it treats its dissidents and those who resist orthodoxy.

But the most important reason is that a system of mass surveillance suppresses our own freedom in all sorts of ways. It renders off-limits all kinds of behavioral choices without our even knowing that it’s happened.

The renowned socialist activist Rosa Luxemburg once said, “*He who does not move does not notice his chains.*” We can try and render the chains of mass surveillance invisible or undetectable, but the constraints that it imposes on us do not become any less potent.

Thank you very much.