

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

August 12, 2013 at 11:21am

Taking another look at privacy and government

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NCR Today

I have made the point before that there is very little privacy remaining in our lives.

A recent *Time* magazine article makes the point well and deserves a closer look. David von Drehle notes the many ways privacy has become an illusion. He speaks of video cameras in every possible location; satellites and drones watching in the skies; smartphones locating individuals at all times; license plate cameras and express lanes tracking the movement of cars; and the storing and processing of information on the Internet.

Everything we do and say is documented, and we often contribute to that through our own use of social networking, GPS devices and in many other ways. Von Drehle also suggests we often welcome this intrusion into our privacy. We want smartphones directing us to the nearest gas station and retail or Internet outlets alerting us to sales and opportunities based on our profiles.

Von Drehle then notes we seem particularly concerned about the government having this knowledge. He seems to recognize how suspicious Americans are of the government, a suspicion that can be traced back to our founding fathers. Von Drehle reminds us that government is made up of people, and the tendency to abuse power or misuse information is almost to be expected.

The article makes a number of significant points, and undoubtedly, we need to consider relevant legislation whenever it could make a positive difference. Yet I continue to wonder why more people aren't concerned about the dangers of nongovernment corporations and employers who can also misuse information and do us harm. Individuals, too, cause harm by hacking into networks, stealing identities and distributing information they don't have a right to. Also, consider how many of our young people may have been denied employment because of something they may have said on Facebook many years earlier.

Maybe one place to start addressing privacy concerns would be for each of us, particularly our young people, to be more careful in willingly providing information when it may not even be needed.

The recent terror alert at U.S. embassies is a strong reminder of the need for effective surveillance to protect our country from terrorist attacks. The need for developing an appropriate balance of privacy and surveillance continues, and a reasonable debate needs to occur. It should be remembered, however, that bad guys exist not only in government but in every part of our community.

I do disagree with von Drehle's idea that a counterbalance to the gathering of data by the government may be provided by citizens like Edward Snowden choosing to release information about what the government is doing. When one's individual conscience learns of something so abhorrent or so corrupt that it needs to be made known, legitimate whistleblowing is indicated. We do a disservice, however, when we encourage the casual release of unauthorized data, whether it involves government secrets or personally embarrassing information. We don't enhance privacy by promoting the disclosure of anybody's secrets without a clear and compelling reason for doing so.

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