Book Review

Review of Igo, Sarah E. 2018. *The Known Citizen: A History of Privacy in Modern America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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Sarah E. Igo's impressive *The Known Citizen: A History of Privacy in Modern America* is less a history of "privacy" per se and more a demonstration of how privacy has become foundational to Americans' sense of personhood and national identity. It is more about "privacy talk" as an "index to changing ideas about society itself" (8). She doesn't define privacy; that would be inappropriate and unnecessary. Rather, the volume serves as a documentation of how new "privacy talk" replaces old "privacy talk" and of how the discourse has been shaped and manipulated to frame and understand varied social and political conflicts over the extent to which citizens are, or should be, known to others.

The book is elegantly written and extensively documented with sources from a variety of academic disciplines and media outlets. The story told is a messy and contradictory one. Each chapter documents a different national conversation about privacy and disclosure and explores how privacy is invoked to challenge and understand quite different social and technological problems. These different episodes do not accumulate into a coherent and linear story in which one phase of privacy discourse gives way to another. Rather, the book stands as a testament to the versatility of the concept and, thus, its endurance in the popular imagination. Privacy stands as a "counterweight to a knowing society, an attempt to calibrate the balance between the knowers and the known" (19).

To be sure, Igo offers some interesting insights about shifts in discourse and understanding. The first chapter ("Technologies of Publicity") demonstrates how privacy shifted from a property-based to a personality-based concept. Chapter Two ("Documents of Identity") offers a fascinating account of the early processes of bureaucratic identification through the use of the social security number and the Social Security Administration. These early efforts of citizen identification were not so much resisted as overly intrusive government surveillance but embraced as a claim of national membership, and as beneficent and positive identification as a "known citizen" (97). Chapter Three ("The Porous Psyche") documents the growing rhetoric about "privacy invasion" and the "vanishing boundary between the self and the social world" (99) as well as the growing sense of suffocation and normalization within the emerging consumer culture and suburbanization of American life in the 1950s.

Chapter Four ("A Right to be Let Alone") contains an interesting account of the entry of a right to privacy into US constitutional law through *Griswold v. Connecticut* and its "progeny." The history demonstrates

how “people” rather than “places” became the locus of privacy rights and shows the shaky and contested ground upon which those rights continue to be based, regardless of the uncontested influence of the 1890 formulation of a “right to be let alone” by Warren and Brandeis. Chapter Five (“Codes of Confidentiality and Consent”) shifts focus to academic research and explores the ethics of privacy that entered the scholarly community after the furores over controversial social science studies such as *The Tearoom Trade* (1970) by Laud Humphreys. Chapter Six (“The Record Prison”) traces concerns about national databanks in the 1960s, the emergent rhetoric about the “surveillance society,” and the limited and fragmentary statutory responses. Chapter Seven (“The Ethic of Transparency”) explores the culture of exposure emerging from “reality TV” programs and widespread obsession with the private lives of public figures.

The book culminates in a chapter (“Stories of One’s Self”) on the contemporary “confessional culture.” The current obsession with self-disclosure through social media has its roots in a whole genre of television programs that propelled private stories to the public arena—the PBS documentary series *An American Family* (1973) being the most notable. Igo correctly refuses to read the confessional culture as a testament to the disappearance of privacy. Rather, she sees it as a re-orientation of privacy. Privacy and the “right to tell one’s story” are two sides of the same coin. Privacy is no longer about finding a place to hide or securing a “right to be let alone” but about the right to control the circulation of one’s information and image.

Her concluding chapter does not try for any overall synthesis but instead attempts to interpret the contemporary angst about the networked self within the context of ubiquitous connectivity and in terms of these historic contestations. Perhaps there is no appropriate conclusion to this incomplete, episodic, and complex story. Rather, the reader gets the impression of quite separate privacy conversations, with tenuous overlap or cross-fertilization. The “privacy talk” about the “right to be let alone” rarely influences the debate about research ethics. The constitutional debates about privacy in the penumbra of the Constitution seem to have little to do with the statutory protections about administrative record-keeping. The emergence of confessional culture occurs despite a growing privacy advocacy lobby and the widespread availability of privacy-enhancing technologies to the average citizen.

The book also gives the impression that the “American” privacy discourse is an insular one, rarely influenced by conversations on similar issues from overseas or by the larger forces of globalization. This message may not have been an intended, but the text contains few references to social and political events, or scholarly and cultural writings, outside the boundaries of the United States. This may infuriate some readers within the surveillance studies community, which is, of course, inherently transnational in its profile and orientation.

In some respects, the American privacy story *is* different from that elsewhere. Issues that would barely raise alarm in other countries are matters of intense dispute in the US. But Igo rarely reflects on these comparative differences. This is essentially and deliberately an American story told by a skilled American historian.

Igo self-consciously admits that the text contains few lessons for those who wish to challenge “surveillance capitalism” and the platform economy. Those who are looking for sustained analysis of the surveillance state and the power of big tech corporations, like Google and Facebook, are likely to be disappointed. Edward Snowden gets just one brief mention. But I believe there may be a lesson here that perhaps deserves a more sustained concluding analysis. Privacy is “broad, abstract and ambiguous” according to US Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black (*Griswold v. Connecticut*, 381 U.S. 479 1965). Its malleability accounts for its position as a powerful device through which so many American social trends and conflicts are framed. But that malleability also permits the concept to be (mis)appropriated and repackaged through meaningless tropes. The platitude “Your privacy is important to us,” repeated and repackaged in so many “privacy” policies, stands as a telling indication that privacy is perhaps everywhere in American culture—and yet nowhere.

Thus, some might read this work as testament to the broader thesis within the surveillance studies literature that “privacy,” both as a discourse and a scheme of regulation, is profoundly inadequate to challenge the

structural effects of surveillance (see, e.g., Bennett 2011). Igo does not engage with that larger argument except to say that the many questions framed by the privacy debate are as salient today as they were when Warren and Brandeis allegedly invented the idea in 1890—which, of course, they did not. She merely insists that the particular information constellation of the twenty-first century, where “profit, security and self-definition mingle indiscriminately” (357), can be better understood if viewed through the lens of historical efforts to render citizens transparent.

Therefore, there is no “end of privacy,” and pronouncements about its death are misleading and self-serving. Rather, privacy shapes an enduring, tense, and uncertain conversation. And, as much as surveillance scholars resist privacy discourse and privacy regulation as the antidote to surveillance, the word, with its many ambiguities and connotations, is not going away—at least not in the United States.

References

Bennett, Colin J. 2011. In Defence of Privacy: The Concept and the Regime. *Surveillance & Society* (8) 4: 485–496.
Griswold v. Connecticut, 381 U.S. 479. 1965. Dissent, Justice Hugo Black.