Book Review

Nippert-Eng, Christina. 2010. *Islands of Privacy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

416pp. Paperback, \$22.50 (US), ISBN: 9780226586533.

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Islands of Privacy uses an in depth interview methodology to explore the stories that a group of urban and suburban Midwestern Americans tell us about their everyday negotiations surrounding a broadly understood realm of personal privacy. With an emphasis on learning about how people explain their negotiations of the line between privacy and its violation, the book presents a sustained look at how this increasingly challenged value plays out in everyday life. She finds that “the heightened fear of one’s privacy being violated is an especially important thread... There is a general feeling now that the condition of privacy has become relegated to rather tiny islands of one’s existence, few and far between, scattered across the vast ocean of accessibility that dominates so much of our lives.” (3)

The general definition of privacy that guides the work is a managerial one—people “seek to carefully choose exactly what is disclosed and concealed, to whom, and how.” (7) This sense of privacy runs close to other definitions of an idea of privacy that’s been retooled for today’s world. As Facebook Czar Mark Zuckerberg put it, “What people want isn’t complete privacy... (instead) they want control over what they share and what they don’t.” And it is the detailed accounts of these human processes of choosing, controlling, and managing disclosure and concealment that make up the heart of *Islands of Privacy*. Eschewing the sort of grand theory building that would be inappropriate given this transactional, very personalized sense for what privacy is, Nippert-Eng uses her time to tell us the stories of people’s efforts to manage their own senses of privacy.

The work is organized into an introduction, a conclusion, and four substantive chapters. In her overall mission, Nippert-Eng explores what the subjects mean by privacy, how they understand its violation, and how they recover from violations. Additionally, there is sustained attention to how we learn our values of privacy in life experiences. In the substantive chapters, the book focuses on specific locations where we manage the work and play of negotiating our privacy. “Secrets and Secrecy” explores learning and expectations regarding those things we choose not to share—humiliations, medicines, crimes—and the stories of how we explain our expectations and what happens when our borders are pushed. “Wallets and Purses” studies social practices and expectations regarding these icons of privacy and information security. “Cell Phones and Email” continues the tour into an exploration of the challenges created by technologies that were emergent when the original research was done (2001-2). Finally, “Doorbells and Windows” brings it on home with an analysis of how we police the boundaries created around our homes, apartments and castles. While there is a titular “Conclusion,” a synopsis or summation of the overall thrust or argument of the work is basically impossible because the author commits to a data-rich telling of the utterly dispersed, negotiated, fragmented, and personal nature of our efforts to manage privacy. If we might occasionally long for a stronger author-theorist assertion of grand theory, readers will find a host of rich conversations, telling shares, and a few revealing overshares in a book that sustains a strong and admirable commitment to allowing people to speak for themselves.

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The strength and originality of this work are not that it unfolds a striking new definition of the idea of privacy. Rather, the strength and originality of this work lie in its closely detailed depiction of the processes, exchanges, and concerns involved in the ongoing social negotiation of this thing we call “privacy.” This helps the reader to see that privacy is a complicated socially embedded value subject to ongoing change, pressure, defense, and negation. As with all works of this type, there are limits on the generalizability of the findings based on the nature of the sample drawn for research. Here, the study participants are affluent and well-educated—the median income is roughly twice the national average and the level of college and graduate education is extraordinarily high. These are not “one percenters,” but the average household income for the study group is in the top twenty percent of U.S. household income. This is an important point because less affluent people are more likely to have less power and control over events and circumstances which violate their privacy as they face more institutionalized violations of privacy. In *Islands of Privacy*, institutional violations of privacy are surely present, but the focus is on interpersonal violations of privacy encountered in social interactions. These differences between the poor and the affluent mean that the nature and negotiation of privacy are going to be different things. And the focus on interpersonal relations means that important new generations of institutional and technocratic surveillance are not as fully explored as they might be.

That said, scholars interested in the vernacular everyday languages of the interpersonal dynamics of privacy and secrecy will find a gold mine of material exploring how people explain and manage their worlds.

¹ Gilliom studies surveillance, privacy, and political contestation (or the lack thereof). He is the author of *Overseers of the Poor: Surveillance, Resistance, and the Limits of Privacy* (Chicago 2001) and, with Torin Monahan, the forthcoming *Supervision: A Citizen's Guide to Surveillance Societies* (Chicago 2012).