



book review

Database Nation: The Death of Privacy in the 21st Century

By *Simson Garfinkel*

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Reviewed by Eugene Oscapella

"Privacy is certainly on the ropes in America today, but so was the environment in 1969," argues Garfinkel, the prolific author on technology issues who has assembled a masterful analysis of the threats to privacy facing modern society. His comment, in the early pages of this book, captures its essence. Privacy is under threat, but it is not yet time to throw in the towel.

Garfinkel spends much of the book in an engrossing itemisation of the challenges to privacy facing modern societies. He seeks to show the plethora of ways that technology is killing one of our most cherished freedoms.

He speaks of the end of due process, where humans are often completely absent from digital decision-making. As a result, he says "we've created a world in which the smallest clerical errors can have devastating impacts on a person's life. It's a world where computers are assumed to be correct, and people wrong."

One of Garfinkel's early chapters examines "absolute identification." Says the author, "Confronted with database discrepancies, identity theft, illegal immigration, and unsolved crimes, many policymakers have put their faith in the technological promise of biometric identification." These technologies will purportedly introduce a regime of absolute identification to which each individual can be precisely known by the unique characteristics of his or her body.

Absolute identification is a seductive idea, says the author, but "it's a pity that it is also fundamentally flawed." He spends the remainder of

the chapter explaining why.

In a chillingly prescient chapter on "kooks and terrorists" – remember, this book was published in 2000 – Garfinkel describes just some of the many vehicles which terrorists will use to wreak havoc in coming years. Among them is information warfare – attacks launched through computer networks, designed to create havoc with computers belonging to banks, hospitals, transportation systems and other pillars of society.

As an example, Garfinkel describes a computer controlling a chemical manufacturing plant. It can be programmed or reprogrammed to open the wrong valves and blow up the plant: "The new technology has put a tremendous amount of power into the hands of people who may not be capable of using it judiciously."

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Garfinkel quotes one senior FBI official as saying that most business leaders seem completely unequipped to understand the problem.

The problem lies in part in a generation gap. Upper management of many companies may be generally technically illiterate, while young employees may be technologically literate, but not very knowledgeable about the company or its goals – "people who are more in the business for the 'I' than the 'us'."

Garfinkel examines many other privacy issues. He speaks of the systematic capture of everyday events – where every purchase, every point of travel, every word and every

document read is routinely recorded and made available for later analysis.

The technology exists to capture this data, he notes, but not the wisdom to figure out how to treat it fairly and justly. "The result is an unprecedented amount of data surveillance, the effects of which we're just beginning to grasp."

He discusses the "bugging of the outside world," where the systematic monitoring of public places may soon make it impossible for most people to escape surveillance. Misuse of genetic information and medical records generally, personal information as a commodity, and growth of what Garfinkel calls the 21st century's "runaway marketing campaigns" are all examined in detail.

The ultimate threat to privacy, says Garfinkel, will be intelligent computers – "machines that can use human-like reasoning powers, combined with blinding calculating speed, to assemble coherent data portraits, interpret and anticipate our mental states, and betray us with false relationships."

Given this list of threats to privacy, the reader might be excused for thinking that Garfinkel would simply throw up his hands in despair. However, he does not. One purpose of the book, he reminds the reader, is to show good cause for abandoning today's laissez-faire (in the United States, at least) approach to privacy protection.

Database Nation is compelling and, in a dark way, highly entertaining reading. The book will etch the importance of privacy indelibly in readers' minds – before, one hopes, it is too late to do anything about it.

*For further information:
www.oreilly.com/catalog/dbnationtp*