

Mass surveillance silences minority opinions, according to study

By Karen Turner

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A new study shows that knowledge of government surveillance causes people to self-censor their dissenting opinions online. The research offers a sobering look at the oft-touted "democratizing" effect of social media and Internet access that bolsters minority opinion.

The study, published in *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, studied the effects of subtle reminders of mass surveillance on its subjects. The majority of participants reacted by suppressing opinions that they perceived to be in the minority. This research illustrates the silencing effect of participants' dissenting opinions in the wake of widespread knowledge of government surveillance, as revealed by whistleblower Edward Snowden in 2013.

The "spiral of silence" is a well-researched phenomenon in which people suppress unpopular opinions to fit in and avoid social isolation. It has been looked at in the context of social media and the echo-chamber effect, in which we tailor our opinions to fit the online activity of our Facebook and Twitter friends. But this study adds a new layer by explicitly examining how government surveillance affects self-censorship.

Participants in the study were first surveyed about their political beliefs, personality traits and online activity, to create a psychological profile for each person. A random sample group was then subtly reminded of government surveillance, followed by everyone in the study being shown a neutral, fictional headline stating that U.S. airstrikes had targeted the Islamic State in Iraq. Subjects were then asked a series of questions about their attitudes toward the hypothetical news event, such as how they think most Americans would feel about it and whether they would publicly voice their opinion on the topic. The majority of those primed with surveillance information were less likely to speak out about their more nonconformist ideas, including those assessed as less likely to self-censor based on their psychological profile.

Elizabeth Stoycheff, lead researcher of the study and assistant professor at Wayne State University, is disturbed by her findings.

“So many people I've talked with say they don't care about online surveillance because they don't break any laws and don't have anything to hide. And I find these rationales deeply troubling,” she said.

She said that participants who shared the “nothing to hide” belief, those who tended to support mass surveillance as necessary for national security, were the most likely to silence their minority opinions.

“The fact that the 'nothing to hide' individuals experience a significant chilling effect speaks to how online privacy is much bigger than the mere lawfulness of one's actions. It's about a fundamental human right to have control over one's self-presentation and image, in private, and now, in search histories and metadata,” she said.

Stoycheff is also concerned about the quietly oppressive behavior of self-censorship.

“It concerns me that surveillance seems to be enabling a culture of self-censorship because it further disenfranchises minority groups. And it is difficult to protect and extend the rights of these vulnerable populations when their voices aren't part of the discussion. Democracy thrives on a diversity of ideas, and self-censorship starves it,” she said. “Shifting this discussion so Americans understand that civil liberties are just as fundamental to the country's long-term well-being as thwarting very rare terrorist attacks is a necessary move.”

Stoycheff has written about the capacity of online sharing tools to inspire democratic change. But the results of this study have caused her views to change. “The adoption of surveillance techniques, by both the government and private sectors, undermines the Internet's ability to serve as a neutral platform for honest and open deliberation. It begins to strip away the Internet's ability to serve as a venue for all voices, instead catering only to the most dominant,” she said. She received no outside funding for the research or publication of this study, she said.

Journalists from The Washington Post shed light on how and why they reported on Edward Snowden blowing the whistle on massive NSA surveillance programs. (The Washington Post)

Karen Turner is a freelance journalist covering tech for The Washington Post.