

Prism: The Internet as New Enclosure

CrimethInc.

June 10, 2013

Perhaps you've read about the recently revealed Prism program, through which the US National Security Agency has been harvesting data from Microsoft, Google, Facebook, Apple, and other major internet corporations.

Remember, this is the tip of the iceberg. We can't know how many similar projects are buried deeper in the apparatus of the surveillance state, unrevealed by daring whistleblowers. We do know that the NSA intercepts billions of emails, phone calls, and other forms of communication every day. What they can monitor they can also censor, à la China or Mubarak.

Many have championed the internet as an opportunity to create new commons, resources that can be shared rather than privately owned. But faced with the increasing state and corporate power over the structures through which we interact online, we have to consider the dystopian possibility that the internet represents a new *enclosure* of the commons: the channeling of communication into formats that can be mapped, patrolled, and controlled.

One of the foundational events in the transition to capitalism was the original enclosure of the commons, in which land that had once been used freely by all was seized and turned into private property. Indeed, this process has repeated again and again throughout the development of capitalism.

It seems likely that we can't recognize "commons" until they are threatened with enclosure. Nobody thinks of the song "Happy Birthday to You" as a commons, because Time Warner (which claims to own the copyright) has not succeeded at profiting off its performance at birthday parties. Peasants and indigenous peoples did not originally regard land as *property held in common*, either—rather, they considered the idea that land could be property absurd.

It would have been similarly difficult, only a couple generations ago, to imagine that one day it would become possible to show people advertisements whenever they chatted together, or to map their tastes and social relations at a glance, or to follow their thought processes in real time by monitoring their Google searches.

We've always had social networks, but no one could use them to sell advertisements—nor were they so easily mapped. Now they reappear as something offered to us by corporations, something external that we have to consult. Aspects of our lives that could never have been privatized before are now practically inaccessible without the latest products from Apple. Cloud computing and pervasive government surveillance only emphasize our dependence and vulnerability.

Rather than the forefront of the inevitable progress of freedom, the internet is the latest battleground in a centuries-running contest with those who would privatize and dominate not just the land, but every facet of our selfhood as well. The burden of proof that it still offers a frontier for freedom rests on those who hope to defend it. In the course of this struggle, it may become clear that digital freedom, like all meaningful forms of freedom, is not compatible with capitalism and the state.

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Retrieved on 2nd December 2020 from crimethinc.com

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