

Privacy technologies as political issues: consumption as mobilization

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In this presentation I presume that privacy is a political issue, and therefore that adoption of privacy technologies is political action and that the marketing of such technologies may be usefully understood as political mobilization.

Privacy technologies, particularly anonymous e-mail and value transfer systems, become commonplace not merely by consumer adoption. The networked nature of these systems requires organizational and institutional adoption. In most such cases, institutions decide the parameters of new consumer services, then market those services, giving consumers, at best, veto power over the shape of those services. In the case of privacy technologies, the interests of privacy-preferring individuals are often directly opposed to the interests of organizations which collect personal information, either as a line of profit or as a regulatory requirement. Therefore consumers are unlikely to be offered privacy technologies even to veto them. Privacy activists are left with the question of how to organize consumer demand to influence the planning and development of these systems.

This presentation begins to answer that question first by examining a historical case of successful mass mobilization which fundamentally altered the technological base of an entrenched industry. This is the case of U.S. nuclear power production, which was virtually halted by organized popular action. Briefly, that movement can be described as consisting first of a period of elite disagreement within the power industry, which received very little media attention. However, the opinions of dissenting experts were available to middle class activists who were suddenly mobilized by the imminent construction of nuclear plants in their neighborhoods. Three factors were important in this stage of mobilization. First was the importance of locality in organizing not-in-my-backyard sentiment. Second was that the affected local community was itself relatively resourceful and able to quickly organize against a sudden grievance. The third factor was a historical moment which supported a culture of activism, fueled by the partial successes of the anti-war and civil rights movements. Media cover-

age in this stage was generally sparse and local. However, in the next stage of mobilization, local activists aligned with then-thriving national activist organizations. These organizations brought three important resources. They brought attractive cultural norms - they were (or presented themselves as) non-violent, inclusive, egalitarian, multi-vocal, participatory, and spiritual. They had available ideologies and arguments which convincingly linked nuclear power, not just to local safety, but to the peace, ecology, and socialist movements. Finally, they had media savvy - they were able to negotiate and appropriate media routines and norms, and were skilled in providing warrantable expertise and telegenic events, such as sit-ins and occupations. Only in this context of an organized opposition and an ideologically prepared populace did events like Three Mile Island and Chernobyl have enduring impact (Gamson 1988; Jasper 1988; Koopmans and Duyvendak 1995; Mitchell 1981; Walsh 1981).

Workshop participants will draw on their experience to apply this historical perspective to the current social, intellectual, and political climate regarding privacy and surveillance technologies. We will explore how can we lay groundwork so that the next time a federal prosecutor subpoenas a bookstore's credit card records, or the next time it is revealed that a popular software program surreptitiously reports the contents of a user's hard drive, the news reaches a populous that is *cognitively prepared* and *socially resourceful*. Note that this is a two-pronged approach, addressing both social and intellectual linkages. We will investigate "the political conditions under which specific discourses become imaginable" (Koopmans and Duyvendak 1995)

To facilitate the discussion, I begin by presenting my own tentative analysis of the current state of privacy discourse, particularly with respect to consumer oriented privacy technologies. I suggest that privacy activism is at the end of the second stage outlined above. That is, there is a small, mobilized, resourceful community approaching privacy, and privacy enhancing technology, as relatively isolated concerns. Within this community the tendency is to focus on the individual as both victim and hero. Problems - of consumer surveillance, of spam, of e-mail privacy - are local and private, even domestic. All of the solutions embody empowered individualism. In the media, the parameters of "the privacy issue" have yet to be established. Coverage is relatively sparse, though increasing rapidly. The history of the nuclear power activism suggests that now might be the time to broaden the scope of privacy issues, to use increased media coverage to link privacy issues to a variety of global concerns, to find common ground with existing activist organizations, and to take advantage of the modest, though significant, successes of welling popular social movements, such as resistance to the World Trade Organization and the biotech industry.

Specifically, we will attempt to answer the following questions: How philosophically and politically expansive can privacy issues be? Which enduring cultural values, other than individualism, can be associated with privacy concerns? Can notions of intimacy be re-attached to privacy in such a way as to facilitate community organization? With what existing activist organizations can we align? What ancillary issues might be successfully engaged to promote a sense of hope? How can privacy issues, and privacy activism, be made telegenic? How can we replace or re-invigorate the power of locality and face-to-face interaction in organizing and reinforcing the interest of middle class individuals in privacy issues? And finally, can this activism be compatible with the needs of profit making privacy enhancing service providers?

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