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Are latest ?hactivists? heroes, or playing God with classified docs?

Pat Perriello | Jun. 17, 2013 NCR Today

In a penetrating cover story for Time magazine?s June 24 edition, Michael Scherer provides a disturbing analysis [1] of recent leaks of classified information.

Edward Snowden?s leaking of information about classified NSA programs represents a significant departure from the way employees with security clearances have operated in the past. It appears to reflect a dramatic change among a growing number of young Internet enthusiasts in the way they believe classified information should be handled.

The reaction to the recent leaks has been wide ranging. Snowden has been called a hero and a traitor. Inevitable comparisons to *1984* and *Brave New World* have been heard. Yet, I must confess that I am tempted to wonder whether these ?hactivists,? as *Time* calls them, aren?t the ones who most closely resemble a ?brave new world? scenario.

People like Edward Snowden, Bradley Manning (currently on trial for leaks of classified information [2]) and a number of others appear to be playing God and making critical judgments for the rest of us. They are the ones who are deciding what should be public information and what, if anything, should not.

Moreover, they are making these judgments without regard to the law and with little or no concern about which individuals might be hurt or compromised. No thought is given to whether national security may be jeopardized. In other words, their belief that the public has a right to know apparently trumps every other possible consideration.

Such an ethical standard is extremely dangerous and far too simplistic.

Our lives are circumscribed by dozens of competing values in any important situation. A study of Supreme Court decisions, for example, would illustrate how the justices themselves grapple with competing constitutional rights as they try to determine how these rights should be applied in a particular case.

One example would be how even within the freedom of religion clause in the Frist Amendment there are competing values between the freedom to practice one?s religion and the proscription against government making any law that establishes religion.

Yet are we now to be at the mercy of a few young and perhaps idealistic folks who will decide what we are to know and what, if anything, is to be withheld?

Make no mistake, these are serious issues and deserve serious consideration. That is why the Patriot Act and its reauthorization were debated and produced significant dissent. I was among those who dissented on a number of issues.

Yet, the American people and the courts developed consensus on how to proceed. No one is suggesting that

those rules are not currently being followed. What we have is a rogue group of informants who disagree with the rules and are determined to ignore and disrupt them whatever the cost. There is nothing heroic in such action.

Additionally, I am troubled by the way the media is portraying this issue. Clearly, they think they have a great story and are pursuing it for all its worth. We are given the impression that some great revelation has occurred.

However, the current Patriot Act was openly debated and actually contains greater protections than were in the original law. Intelligence committees in Congress are regularly briefed and have approved executive action. The administration is also required to seek the approval of the court to take certain actions.

The other reality is that privacy is almost non-existent in our culture today. Our personal data is everywhere.

Millions compromise their privacy everyday through the use of social media such as Facebook. It is likely more difficult for the government to obtain and make use of data about ourselves than for non-governmental groups.

Once again we are back to the canard that government is evil. We should be paying more attention to the many ways banks, employers and a myriad of other organizations are using and perhaps misusing our personal information.

I have always believed myself to be a dedicated civil libertarian and a strong advocate for privacy. I began to rethink some of these notions when I saw that the intrusions into privacy through the Internet are massive, and we will probably have to live with many of them.

From the days of the first plane hijackings, Americans have accepted what they see as necessary invasions of privacy for the protection of society. The government having a list of phone numbers Americans have called seems pretty innocuous in the Information Age.

Far more dangerous, it appears to me, is the notion that a few self-proclaimed saviors can determine what secrets must be printed on the front page of our newspapers, and because their commitment to revealing information is so great, they really don?t care who gets hurt and what the consequences of their actions might be.

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