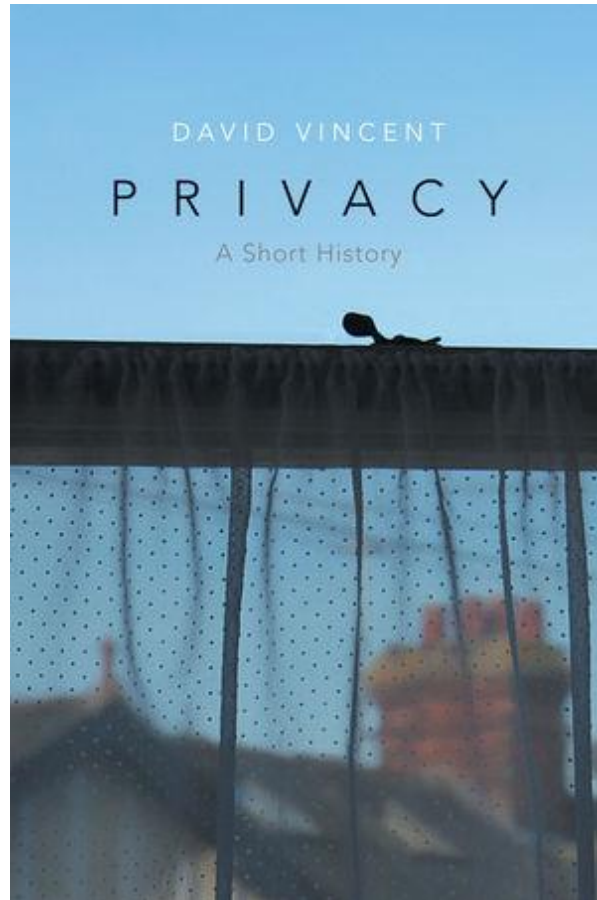


Book Review: Privacy: A Short History

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Privacy: A Short History

David Vincent

Malden, MA: Polity, 2016. 189. Book.

Communication is rarely secure and relationships are fraught with intrusions. Technology and privacy researchers are keen to the first point but overlook the second because of how we contextualize and define privacy in the present. Following the enduring claim of Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis that one has a “right to privacy,” namely, “to be let alone,” we conceive of surveillance with metaphors like Foucault’s panopticon and the security state, with its various devices for tracking and monitoring people. Because of this, we fail to recognize broader and more nuanced forms of privacy. We are observing the tail end of a phenomena for which David Vincent’s *Privacy: A Short History* provides a brief outline, the life and death of a mode of privacy. The significance of this book is not only a social history of privacy or the history of the idea itself, but the significance of artifacts and technology in creating a sense of privacy. Environments afforded certain types of sociality lending to or detracting from this sense. This book provides both researchers and curious readers with an insight into the relationship of technology and privacy in a much broader context than what is typically discussed.

In the first chapter, Vincent uses medieval London as a starting point for a number of reasons. While acknowledging that people likely always have desired or claimed a right to retreat from the public into their own spaces, the fourteenth century provides a comparison of privacy for individuals between both intimate others and formal institutions. In the medieval case this is the Church. Vincent establishes an important new dimension for privacy as a commodity, which involves negotiation, adaptation, and the weighing of gains against risks. These conflicts emerge in domestic and public spaces, and in the practices people used to find transient moments where intimate conversation was possible. How society saw the threshold of a home, locks and the use of thicker walls were as important to privacy as the roles and behavior of domestic units, the proper etiquette for husbands and wives and the management of households. Vincent looks beyond disappearing ink and to the self-discipline exercised by people in protecting their private thoughts and matters.

Chapter two covers the modern era (roughly 1650-1800), where media emerged as a source for private, personal discourse. Privacy in face-to-face relationships was attained largely through the virtue of discretion, and print changed social constraints on individuals, rather than emancipating readers all together. Through the example of literary guides and religious manuals, Vincent describes a type of idealized interiority generated for the literate. The trading of correspondence and handwritten letters engendered an intimate means of mediated communication, facilitated by overall increase use of the postal system. Those with a literacy beyond writing and to the workings of the eighteenth-century Post Office found much more virtual privacy as they conducted

their affairs, and could escape into recreational spaces of the mind, beyond the prying eyes of others.

In chapter three, Vincent describes a “golden age” of privacy in 19th century. Bentham’s Panopticon is contrasted with an alternative narrative of privacy more akin to what we might think of *propriety*. Victorian sensibilities about the borders between private and public life emerged, and the architecture of the period came to reflect the sorts of relationships desired by families. Separate bedrooms, thicker internal walls in homes, and domestic plumbing are all associated with the prosperity and improved privacy experienced by the English middle-class. As one example, fences transformed personal gardens from an openly sociable alternative to indoors into an extension of the privacy found within the home. At the same time, an awareness of the need to defend a sense of privacy and enlist others in aid resulted in new practices and artifacts designed just for that. In media, the very public use of the telegraph necessitated an early form of cryptography. As each message needed to be dictated to the clerk operating the telegraph key, the apprehensive sender resorted to composing messages in code. Laws emerged in Britain which protected citizens from opportunistic, blackmailing journalists. But the census, national registration, and the monopolization of the post created the foundation for the sort of surveillance we fear today, via an omnipresent and centralized information technology.

Chapter four covers roughly 1900-1970. The notion of privacy had been adopted and promoted by the state, as means to measure progress. In British eyes, greater prosperity afforded greater privacy, and the lack thereof was no longer a sign of individual failure in managing the home but economic disparity. The importance of the front door reemerges in Vincent’s analysis, and the working-class’s desire for a home of their own creates both patterns of migration and adaptation for those in slums and economically depressed areas. Automobiles promised a home on wheels for those wishing to escape to the country, along with trams, buses and trains. Small moral panics over motor cars and telephones came with the freedom they offered. Radios and televisions also expanded the available mental landscape one could escape to. These freedoms coincided with the birth of the surveillance state as the centralized information technology eroded anonymity in the practice of licensing. National insurance became the United Kingdom’s means to continue national registration in peacetime. Anxieties over espionage, surveillance, and state infringement of privacy fueled dystopian visions like George Orwell’s *1984* (published in 1949). Here Vincent turns to the German Democratic Republic (GDR) as an example of the totalitarian destruction of privacy, and the Stasi’s analog archives as an ultimate form of intelligence. Two remarkable observations are that neighbors could once again access an external authority to settle domestic disputes (impossible since the loss of medieval church courts described in Chapter 1), and that privacy’s tenuous nature in the GDR led to a sense of “shared intimacy” (p. 110), rather than the seeming isolation of a private sphere.

Chapter five will be the most familiar to most non-historians, by looking at privacy in the “digital age” (1970 to the present). Despite its emergence as an unquestion-

able human right and the anticipated impact of digital information technology, here is where we find the “death” of privacy. The incredible difficulty in regulating and protecting autonomous individuals and their communication within and across national boundaries led to the divestment of state control. This did not prevent the UK from accessing private communication in the interests of national security, the same way it would open sealed envelopes circulated through the Post Office. Notably absent in the analysis is any word on the United State’s National Security Agency’s PRISM program, or the role of private corporations in surveilling private individuals. Vincent compares Edward Snowden’s accusation that the NSA is “the panopticon” to past privacy panics, arguing that uncertainty makes it difficult to form a clear understanding about the degree and extent of privacy abuses that currently exist. What is most valuable is the way Vincent draws us away from the view of privacy as protected information and personal property under threat, but to contextual relationships, situated attitudes and behaviors people pursue to their own ends.

Unfortunately, the scope of this book combined with the fragmentary primary sources and records that exist on this topic means Vincent can only provide a cursory survey of privacy over the past seven centuries. *Privacy: A Short History* feels a bit like the single book abridged edition of Sir James Fraizer’s twelve volume *The Golden Bough*. While it retains revolutionary re-treatments of concepts largely taken for granted, it promises a fine detail and exhaustive examples that have yet to be revealed. The focus on an English/Western concepts of privacy promises a good foundation for future comparative studies. Likewise, Vincent’s bibliographic essays and notes provide a wealth of further reading.

There are three extremely useful tools to be found in this book for anyone interested in privacy and security research. First, it provides a much needed historicization of the concept which gives us alternative definitions to work from. Second, this historicizing emphasizes the role of materiality and artifacts in what measures of privacy is possible in an environment. Lastly, it marks an “end to privacy,” or at least, privacy as we knew it, based off of more than a critique of surveillance apparatuses. Inspired from the examples and approach used in this book, perhaps we can identify and develop new understandings outside the familiar tropes that currently drive privacy research and discourse.

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