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Drinking from the Firehose



The Clipper Chip and Pretty Good Privacy: New "Al-Gore-Rhythms" of Orwellian Paranoia

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On March 11, 1994, The <WIRED> Online Information Service posted an urgent message across the Internet. The header read "Electronic Privacy — A Call to Action." An encryption algorithm called SKIPJACK along with a decryption device known as the "Clipper Chip" is being supported by the U.S. government; the purpose is to allow an electronic "back door" to every telecommunications device commonly used. Only authorized government agencies securing the proper warrant would be able to obtain such access, it is claimed. The <WIRED> message encourages readers to oppose this measure for all the obvious reasons.

In the meantime, a copy of Al Gore's speech to the International Telecommunication Union, given in Argentina on March 21, 1994, came across one of the lists to which I subscribe. (1) The speech describes the glories and potentials of a "Global Information Infrastructure" or GII which is being proposed as the world's version of the National Information Infrastructure we are hearing about constantly. The juxtaposition of these two references to electronic development was unsettling to me.

Naturally, George Orwell's *1984* came to mind. That's always been one of my favorite books; for some reason I am fascinated by tales of the future that focus on a world where people struggle to maintain their humanity. I am beginning to wonder if I will live in such a world sooner than I could imagine.

Some people believe we already live in such a world. It didn't take much effort to find popular press discussions of Clipper Chip and other security concerns (see the references at the end of this piece). The day I see a headline proclaiming "Aliens Infiltrate the Internet" in the *National Enquirer*, I'll know we've arrived.

I polled several computer experts. My basic question: "Is this something I need to add to my list of things to keep me awake at night?" At least one person, Clifford Lynch (Director of Library Automation, University of CA System), agreed that it is indeed. Others are more cynical. Some argue that the U.S. government has been spying on ordinary citizens for years and that these new developments will neither improve nor deter their efforts. Most monitoring is relatively harmless they say, and

besides, it helps fight crime. A recent editorial in <WIRED> (see 2 below) suggests that privacy is a dead concept in cyberspace anyway. The less we have, the better off we'll be. What?

During an Alumni Day seminar at the University of NC-Chapel Hill's School of Information and Library Science, April 29, 1994, John Ulmschneider (Assistant Director for Library Systems, NC State University) observed that a person can enter a library of printed materials, pull a volume off the shelf, take a look at it, and return it to its place with no one the wiser; a common behavior when one is not too keen on letting the world at large in on prurient or embarrassing interests. This surreptitiousness is impossible in the online environment.

The most disturbing trend I discovered in attempting to ask about the issue was that no one has time to talk about it. The pace of our daily lives is hurtling along ever faster; we do not make the time to stop and ponder what it all means. I barely have enough time to sit down and write this column. Life is a series of deadlines. Of course, this time of year is always particularly busy in academe, we argue, but it never seems to let up anymore. In this preoccupied state, we do not pause and reflect on the quality of our lives, and that can be dangerous.

But enter a new folk hero: Phillip Zimmerman. Zimmerman has created the antithesis of the Clipper Chip: an encryption program named "Pretty Good Privacy," or PGP for short. This home-grown, impossible-to-break (so far), easy-to-use program was released over the Internet in 1991; since then a commercial version has become available for a mere \$100 a copy. Now the U.S. government and a company Zimmerman used to work for are after him for alleged export and patent law violations. In the meantime, rebel freedom fighters in Southeast Asia, drug traffickers in South America, ordinary business people everywhere, and possibly your grandmother are using PGP to protect their electronic communications. (3)

Striking a balance between civil liberty and national security is going to continue to be an important debate as the NII and the GII are developed. It may be tempting to argue that technology is value-free, but

anything developed to advance the progress of humankind can also be used to destroy it. Don't say you don't have time to think about it. Re-read your dog-eared, acidic, crumbling paperback edition of *1984*, and go see the movie *Schindler's List*. Then tell me you don't have time!

REFERENCES:

(1) I received Gore's speech over <ISTL: Issues in Science and Technology Librarianship,> an electronic publication of the ACRL Science & Technology Section; it is probably also available as a government document and may be available elsewhere; if you can't find it send me an e-mail and I'll forward it to you!

(2) Platt, Charles. "Nowhere to Hide." <WIRED>, Nov. 1993, p. 112.

(3) Bulkeley, William H. "Popularity Overseas of Encryption Code has the U.S. Worried." *The Wall Street Journal*, (Eastern ed.), April 28, 1994, p.1.

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WIRED Online Clipper Archive: Can be accessed by:

- o WIRED Infobot e-mail server send e-mail to infobot@wired.com containing the words "send clipper/index" on a single line inside the message body
- o WIRED Gopher gopher to gopher.wired.com select "Clipper Archive"
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