

The Surveillance State: The “Digital Dog Ate” Our Civil-Liberties Homework: “It’s Just the Way It Is”

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Of all the excuses ladled out for the Obama administration’s shredding of the Fourth Amendment while assaulting press freedom and prosecuting “national security” whistleblowers, none is more pernicious than the claim that technology is responsible.

At first glance, the explanation might seem to make sense. After all, the capacities of digital tech have become truly awesome. It’s easy to finger “technology” as the driver of government policies, as if the president at the wheel has little choice but to follow the technological routes that have opened up for Big Brother.

Now comes *New York Times* reporter Charlie Savage, telling listeners and viewers of a *Democracy Now* [interview](#) that the surveillance state is largely a matter of technology: “It’s just the way it is in the 21st century.”

That’s a great way to depoliticize a crucial subject — downplaying the major dynamics of the political economy, anti-democratic power and top-down choices — letting leaders off the hook, as if sophistication calls for understanding that government is to be regulated by high-tech forces rather than the other way around.

In effect, the message is that — if you don’t like mass surveillance and draconian measures to intimidate whistleblowers as well as journalists — your beef is really with technology, and good luck with pushing back against *that*. Get it? The fault, dear citizen, is not in our political stars but in digital tech.

When Amy Goodman asked Savage about the Obama administration’s record-high prosecutions of whistleblowers under the Espionage Act, he summed up this way:

“Because of technology, it’s impossible to hide who’s in contact with whom anymore, and cases are viable to investigate now that weren’t before. That’s not something Obama did or Bush did. It’s just the way it is in the 21st century, and investigative journalism is still grappling with the implications of that.”

A more astute and candid assessment of such matters can be found in “Through the Looking-Glass,” where Lewis Carroll wrote this dialogue:

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, “it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” Alice replied, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” Humpty Dumpty responded, “which is to be master — that’s all.”

The surveillance state is not the default setting of digital technology. The surveillance state is a failure and suppressor of democracy.

A surveillance state or a democratic system — which is to be master?

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