

THE ON TECH NEWSLETTER

The Spying That Changed Big Tech

The backlash against the industry traces back partly to the Snowden revelations.



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This article is part of the On Tech newsletter. Here is a collection of past columns.

I want to rewind to a recent point in history when the United States government snooped on American technology companies. It helps us more fully understand the current climate of mistrust between Big Tech, U.S. politicians and the American public.

In 2013, reporting by The Washington Post — based on documents from the former U.S. government contractor Edward J. Snowden — revealed that the National Security Agency and its British counterpart had essentially hacked reams of information from customers of Google, Yahoo and other American internet companies without those companies' knowledge. The spy agencies did this by intercepting internet traffic from undersea internet cables or other access points between corporate computer centers outside the United States.

Reasonable people can argue over whether the N.S.A. was justified in using this and other programs to siphon billions of pieces of information from phone calls, texts, emails and other digital records in the mission to defend the United States from terrorists. The reporting on the documents, by numerous news organizations, set off a public debate on the balance of privacy rights, the rule of law and national security.

I want to focus on the ways that those revelations of U.S. government snooping altered the technology that we use and ended the post-9/11 cooperation between the federal government and tech giants — for good and for ill. It's a reminder that one moment can bend the arc of history, even just a little, and that the current backlash against Big Tech traces back partly to the mistrust between Silicon Valley and the U.S. government that deepened after the Snowden disclosures.

First, that 2013 article in The Washington Post set off shock waves in Silicon Valley. Tech executives in public or (mostly) in private said that the N.S.A. hacking was a betrayal — a step way too far in the name of national security.

Tech company customers, particularly corporations and government officials outside the U.S., also worried about the possibility that information from their emails or sensitive documents might wind up in the hands of U.S. spies — either through the tech companies' compliance with legal U.S. government orders or by sneaking through Big Tech's back doors. Tech giants had an ethical and business dilemma.

The tech companies' most visible response was to bring secure technology into the mainstream and build more of their own digital plumbing like undersea internet cables. U.S. officials are now concerned about the risks of both of those changes — for understandable reasons — but they don't tend to own up to the government's own role in making them happen.

Companies including Google, Microsoft and Yahoo sped up their use of encrypted technologies that scramble the content of messages or phone calls so that anyone who snoops on them can access only gibberish.

Encryption is one of thorniest technologies in the world, because it both protects ordinary people's communications from prying eyes and makes criminals harder to track. Again, when U.S. officials prod tech companies such as Apple and Facebook over the harmful effects of encryption, rarely do they acknowledge that the government's actions helped make the technology widespread.

And maybe the biggest shift from the N.S.A.'s data siphoning was helping sour relations between the U.S. government and technology superpowers that is still playing out today.

Let Us Help You Protect Your Digital Life

- With Apple's latest mobile software update, we can decide whether apps monitor and share our activities with others. Here's what to know.
- A little maintenance on your devices and accounts can go a long way in maintaining your security against outside parties' unwanted attempts to access your data. Here's a guide to the few simple changes you can make to protect yourself and your information online.
- Ever considered a password manager? You should.
- There are also many ways to brush away the tracks you leave on the internet.

"The era of quiet cooperation is over," my colleagues David E. Sanger and Nicole Perlroth wrote in 2014, about a year after news organizations' reporting from the Snowden documents. (Nicole has more on this in her recently published book, which I highly

recommend.)

The trust gap between tech giants and leaders in the United States and other countries was probably inevitable, and in many ways it's healthy. Companies such as Google, Facebook, Amazon and Apple are so rich and their products are so essential in our lives that they have become nearly as powerful as governments. It's sensible to weigh whether Big Tech needs more government guardrails.

There remain areas of cooperation between the government and Big Tech, including military projects that some tech employees believe are dangerous. But there are other ways in which the hangover of the Snowden revelations has made it more difficult for tech companies and government officials to work together on helpful shared interests such as election security and improving technology expertise inside of government agencies.

Tech companies are responsible for the enmity, yes, but the government's willingness to intrude on American companies is partly to blame, too.

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TIP OF THE WEEK

How to time a new phone purchase

If you bought an iPhone 12 last week, you might have felt like a chump this week when Apple introduced the iPhone 13. (Or maybe you didn't? Good for you!) Brian X. Chen explains how to know when we're at risk of a newly bought device becoming old news just after it was purchased.

I've written plenty about how to determine that it's time to call it quits on a piece of technology and consider an upgrade. And when you are ready for a new model, it's also important to figure out the right time to buy.

If you bought an iPhone 12 or a Pixel 5 a few weeks before Apple and Google unveiled the iPhone 13 and Pixel 6, for example, that might be less than ideal. If you had waited a little longer, you could have paid the same price for a phone with more advanced features or scored a discount on the previous model.

It's not intuitive to time an upgrade, so I'll share the resources that I turn to:

- For Apple products, the MacRumors buyers' guide tracks the average shelf life of iPhones, iPads and Macs to predict when new models are expected. If a product is nearing the end of its cycle — about 360 days for an iPhone — the guide will caution you that fresh devices are coming.

- For non-Apple devices, there isn't a comparable guide. I'll just share with you what I know. Tech manufacturers typically stick to a pattern. Many of them, including Google, Microsoft and Samsung, tend to release their flagship products such as smartphones and computers in the fall, timed for the back-to-school and holiday shopping seasons.

So in general, if you have decided that you are ready for a shiny new device, try not to buy in the summer. You will be rewarded if you wait.

Before we go ...

- **Reshaping the internet as we know it:** Brian X. Chen and Kate Conger have a plain English explanation of changes from Apple and Google that will alter the ads we see online, using less of our personal data, and may compel businesses to raise product prices or adapt in other ways. In a separate column, Brian asks: Who might win and lose when Apple and Google dictate how the internet pays for itself?
- **He is the envy of the international sports media:** The Twitch streaming channel of Ibai Llanos, 26, landed the first interview with Lionel Messi after the soccer superstar switched teams. My colleague Rory Smith explains how Llanos became a sports power player thanks to pandemic isolation, his informal interviewing style and soccer players' love of video games.
- **Farhad Manjoo believes that computers for our faces will be the next big thing.** "I only hope that, unlike with smartphones, this time we go slow," the Times Opinion columnist writes. (In Wednesday's On Tech, I said that the ubiquity of smartphones is holding back new technologies like computers for our faces.)

Hugs to this

"Do you want to try wasabi?" (You will believe what happened next.)

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