I think most people would agree that our privacy is valuable to us. We all have a version of ourselves which we show to others, a version we reserve for those closest to us, and a version we keep private to ourselves. We expect these to remain separate, and to have control over when and how they are presented to others.

Most people would have an issue if these versions of ourselves were publicly consolidated so that everything about us could be known by anyone that wanted to know. However, as we’ve learned over the last few weeks, that’s exactly what’s been happening via ubiquitous surveillance. Hundreds, if not thousands of profiles made of aggregated information about us exist in databases belonging to governments and corporations around the world. Yet, the vast majority of the population continues to voluntarily give away its personal and private data in exchange for services and convenience.

Even when not voluntary, our data is captured by agencies like the NSA and the GCHQ, then shared between governments, allowing foreign nations to build their own databases on the citizens of both their allies and enemies. As discussed in Data and Goliath, Russia and the US has exchanged information about the other’s citizens, even though the two are adversarial nations.

Schneier goes on to point out that these partnerships only make sense when the goal is not safety and national security, but rather the surveillance of the global population.

So, is there a point where national security is more important than our privacy? I personally believe the question to be arbitrary, since while that may be the reason given publicly for government surveillance, it certainly seems to be little more than an afterthought. Did collecting all that data in Las Vegas help the FBI to find any terrorists in 2003? It did not. In fact, Ellen Knowlton of the FBI said herself, they found no terrorists once they went through all that data. Only some hits on “similar names” and that was it. But it was an unprecedented act which gave the FBI a treasure trove of data. I guess what happens in Vegas no longer stays in Vegas.

I’ve intentionally avoided the inclusion of our rights in the conversation for one simple reason: we only have rights because those with the power to enforce them (our government) grant them to us. The same government which has decided that ubiquitous surveillance is necessary. Doesn’t sound like that enforcement mechanism values our rights too much, does it?

While we can argue about abstract concepts like natural rights, human rights, and constitutional rights, these things are just that: abstract, and ultimately meaningless without the power of enforcement. The idea we have rights serves as more of a pacification mechanism than as a fact of reality. They give us the impression we have freedom, and so we do not fight to be free. They give us something to squabble over with each other, such as with abortion rights, voter rights, and similarly controversial political topics, keeping us distracted from the government’s oppression of free will, critical thought, and I’d argue personal dignity.

Are we truly free when we live with only the illusion of privacy? When so much data has been collected about us, and both governments and marketing teams have refined their psychological techniques so much that some of the most intelligent and renowned psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, and others in such disciplines question whether we even have free will anymore? With the data collected about us, and the invasiveness of advertising and subliminal messaging, how can any of us even know if our choices are really our choices, or if they’re instead driven by external influences?

Do I like digital surveillance? No, I do not. But what saddens me most is that ultimately, most people do not seem to care. None of us, myself included, are willing to ditch our devices and become luddites to avoid surveillance, nor do I think it would even be effective if we tried.

This topic is, however, something I’ve given quite a lot of thought to over the last few weeks, and I’m nowhere near to coming to any sort of firm position. I’d say I’m currently in the “black pilled” phase where it seems there’s little point to caring. But I recognize that as we lose our privacy and autonomy, we lose what makes us human, and this I find to be deeply disturbing.

There must be an answer to the problem of surveillance and what can be done with the data collected from it, and over the rest of this semester, I sincerely hope to find… hope. Because as it stands, I believe we’re already living in a dystopian nightmare, and I wonder how long until the dam breaks, the mask comes off, and our government no longer finds the pretense of civility as necessary.