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Book review: 'The Known Citizen: A History of Privacy in Modern America' by Sarah E. Igo

By Glenn C. Altschuler  May 20, 2018
In his decision in Griswold v. Connecticut (1965), overruling legislation banning married couples’ use of contraceptives, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas affirmed a “right to privacy.” That right, Douglas declared, was “older than the Bill of Rights, older than our political parties, older than our school system.”

Justly remembered as a landmark case in the “rights revolution” of the 1960s and ’70s, Sarah Igo, a professor of history at Vanderbilt University, points out, the court’s ruling was part of a dialogue that had long been underway. In “The Known Citizen,” Igo provides a history of privacy in the United States in the 20th century. As she examines an array of privacy issues, including the assignment of Social Security numbers to citizens, personality tests, gated communities; reality TV; “confessional culture;” credit bureaus; government surveillance; social media; the collection, use and hacking of big data, Igo sheds light on conflicts between protective selves and an increasingly intrusive society. Igo also examines internal struggles between desire to know, to remain unknown and to be known on one’s own terms. Sweeping and searching, sensitive to differences related to social class, gender and race, “The Known Citizen” is an informative examination of an urgent problem in 21st-century America.

With a project of this scale, “The Known Citizen” omits some relevant topics. For example, Igo does not address Americans’ insatiable hunger for information about the private lives of movie stars in the...
first decades of the 20th century; the rise of fan magazines and gossip columnists; and the extension of the “celebrification” of American culture to athletes, entertainers and captains of industry. Nor does Igo assess the pivotal role of Sen. Gary Hart’s “Monkey Business” scandal on media coverage of politicians.

That said, “The Known Citizen” does an exceptional job of undercutting the simplistic narrative of a steady loss of privacy and analyzing instead Americans’ evolving understanding of the concept. She notes that protections were granted to individuals on public assistance from the prying eyes of the state in the 1960s and ’70s – and examines the implications for students of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Fair Credit Reporting Act. On the other hand, she points to the staggering amount of data accumulated by government agencies and private corporations. Igo reminds us as well that gay activists fought to keep the names of HIV-infected individuals out of public health registries, while reshaping privacy’s meaning by “outing” prominent people and insisting “less on a right to privacy than on a right not to have to be private.” By the end of the 20th century, Igo writes, “achieving some sense of privacy — or control over one’s narrative — could entail talking rather than hiding, divulging rather than seeking solitude.”

And so, Igo ends her splendid book with a suggestion that “new tactics have appeared on the horizon,” with tools to assist us in “navigating an all-too-knowing society.” Her story, it’s clear, is a work-in-progress.

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