

Berlin Declaration by Scientists on the Prerequisites for Democracy in the DIGITAL WORLD

The revelations made by the whistleblower Edward J. Snowden have led to some shocking facts becoming recognisable for many citizens: evidently it is not only authoritarian states but also liberal democracies who routinely monitor the electronic communication of a growing number of people. In fact, the technology used to monitor, record and evaluate these communications appears to be even more advanced in the democratic states. This is happening on a global scale by means of a range of different filters and mathematical algorithms and not only to investigate specific, tangible suspicions. One consequence was even the “mistaken” inclusion of tens of thousands of people in the surveillance net, according to an account given by the intelligence agencies themselves.

These practices have arisen in recent years out of an increasing interaction between technological developments, economic ways of thinking and new security policies enacted after the attacks of September 2001.

Even before this, the relationship between liberty and security could best be described as precarious and now it has clearly shifted towards security: fundamental personal rights are being breached on a large scale; the importance of democracy, justice and the rule of law for the exercising of state power is being challenged. In this way, core achievements of Western constitutional states are being surrendered and it is particularly worrying to see one of the oldest modern democracies playing a central role in this process. A range of different historical experiences (including in the former GDR with the Stasi) should lead us to the conclusion that a political system which regards its citizens with a permanent attitude of mistrust and general suspicion is not viable in the long-term. It has to fall apart because of this distrust. As social and natural scientists from a wide range of disciplines we are deeply perturbed by the news of systematic, wide-ranging, routine storage and evaluation of electronic communication, some of which was performed jointly with private network operators and data services. This forces us to conclude that the foundations of our democratic societies are being increasingly undermined.

As experts for the scientific analysis of the social and natural aspects of our modern human society, we know how fragile our legally constituted social democracy actually is. It is an achievement we need to actively renew and defend every day. If intelligence agencies are allowed to grind down human and civil rights, this represents a dangerous threat to liberty and responsibility as foundations of how we live together as humans. So democracy is not only threatened from outside; it is putting a question mark over its own future.

It is becoming more and more apparent that many party-political actors do not recognise how serious this situation is, are unwilling to articulate this for fear of upsetting political alliances, or are behaving opportunistically in view of the coming German parliamentary elections.

We are convinced that current global challenges can only be met by means based on justice and liberty: this applies to climate change, global food security, nuclear safety and terrorism. As scientists we depend on the freedom of thought. Surveillance, whether organised by the state or private firms, and the repression of free communication are the enemies of this freedom.

Our politicians, civil society, business and academic sectors are all now confronted with a duty that Edward J. Snowden’s revelations have placed firmly on the political agenda: together we have to try to understand how our commonwealth is being affected by the processes, structures and technology of the digital world and to confer on how we wish to shape our political order in an era of global electronic communication, both for ourselves and for the next generations.

Here we are referring to the prerequisites of justice and liberty in a world offering us greater opportunities than ever before in human history, but also greater threats.

We observe that:

1. Germany urgently needs a “Great Debate” with equal participation from the political, civil society, economic and academic sectors in order to confer on the current situation and benefit from a wide range of expert viewpoints.
2. After the coming parliamentary elections, a new Enquete Commission (select committee) needs to be set up immediately on the issue of “Protection of privacy and civil liberties”, with equal representation from members of parliament and scientists.
3. Germany has to actively work towards European and global regulations which meet current challenges regarding political, technical and economic developments in the digital world, aiming to defend and renew democratic structures. This should include the aim of becoming less dependent on monopolistic IT infrastructure, often dominated by US-American interests. The European parliament could also set up a special committee in this regard since this would also represent a suitable framework for the public debate which needs to be held and the development of practicable concepts.

The signatories to this declaration will support these processes.

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