



The Transparent Society: Will Technology Force Us to Choose Between Privacy and Freedom?

David Brin

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In New York and Baltimore, police cameras scan public areas twenty-four hours a day. Huge commercial databases track your finances and sell that information to anyone willing to pay. Host sites on the World Wide Web record every page you view, and “smart” toll roads know where you drive. Every day, new technology nibbles at our privacy. Does that make you nervous?

David Brin is worried, but not just about privacy. He fears that society will overreact to these technologies by restricting the flow of information, frantically enforcing a reign of secrecy. Such measures, he warns, won't really preserve our privacy. Governments, the wealthy, criminals, and the techno-elite will still find ways to watch us. But we'll have fewer ways to watch them. We'll lose the key to a free society: accountability.

The Transparent Society is a call for “reciprocal transparency.” If police cameras watch us, shouldn't we be able to watch police stations? If credit bureaus sell our data, shouldn't we know who buys it? Rather than cling to an illusion of anonymity - a historical anomaly, given our origins in close-knit villages - we should focus on guarding the most important forms of privacy and preserving mutual accountability. The biggest threat to our freedom, Brin warns, is that surveillance technology will be used by too few people, now by too many.

A society of glass houses may seem too fragile. Fearing technology-aided crime, governments seek to restrict online anonymity; fearing technology-aided tyranny, citizens call for encrypting all data. Brin shows how, contrary to both approaches, windows offer us much better protection than walls; after all, the strongest deterrent against snooping has always been the fear of being spotted. Furthermore, Brin argues, Western culture now encourages eccentricity - we're programmed to rebel! That gives our society a natural protection against error and wrong-doing, like a body's immune system. But “social T-cells” need openness to spot trouble and get the word out.

The Transparent Society is full of such provocative and far-reaching analysis. The inescapable rush of technology is forcing us to make new choices about how we want to live. This daring book reminds us that an open society is more robust and flexible than one where secrecy reigns. In an era of gnat-sized cameras, universal databases, and clothes-penetrating radar, it will be more vital than ever for us to be able to watch the watchers. With reciprocal transparency we can detect dangers early and expose wrong-doers. We can gauge the credibility of pundits and politicians. We can share technological advances and news. But all of these benefits depend on the free, two-way flow of information.

The Transparent Society: Will Technology Force Us to Choose Between Privacy and Freedom? Details

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Author : David Brin

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From Reader Review *The Transparent Society: Will Technology Force Us to Choose Between Privacy and Freedom?* for online ebook

Peter Tillman says

Well thought out & well-written. Nice!

Mark Ballinger says

A not bad book, but sadly outdated by history since 1998. The idea is that a society where openness rules, but from the government to the people and people to government, is a society trending toward justice. This book could use an update!

"but the real impulse to force them open may only come after some band of terrorists manages to kill thousands with a gas attack, or blow up a skyscraper, or poison a reservoir, or 'dust' a city with radionuclides (sic). When this happens, many will call for draconian solutions, granting the state new police powers. But there may be an alternative, deflecting citizen ire toward a true center of culpability."

I guess we haven't seen that alternative yet.

Aaron Slack says

In this non-fiction book, talented science fiction author David Brin (the Uplift series) makes a long and rambling case for a transparent society being the only way to prevent government and private entities from abusing new and existing surveillance technologies. I disagree. When government and/or public opinion outlaw a legitimate practice, all the transparency in the world, two-way or not, will not help. For example, what about China's one child per family policy, enforced with forced abortions and sterilizations. How would transparency help parents here? Brin seems to naively believe that as long as two-way transparency exists (i. e. the government knows what we are doing but we also know what the government is doing), somehow democracy will ultimately triumph because the people will change corrupt laws. An interesting book, but far too flawed to provide many useful ideas on this topic.

Michael says

In *The Transparent Society* (1998), David Brin overviews various threats to our privacy in an age with increasing information technologies and proposes a policy of open reciprocity transparency. Arguing against "strong privacy" advocates who oppose a transparent society (20), Brin argues that "'reciprocal transparency' may be our best hope to enhance and preserve a little privacy in the next century" (55). He explores the various threats to privacy, most of which are surveillance (cameras, sensors, tracking shopping habits) and argues that many who call upon a previous time are relying on nostalgia (68-69). According to Brin, "there

was no *golden age of privacy* in the past" (70). For Brin, reciprocal transparency is the widening of information flows so that when someone's data or information or privacy is exposed, other parties agree to have theirs exposed (e.g., managers having drug tests if their employees do) (81). Brin's argument is based on the assumption that openness is "essential for the survival of any civilization" (144).

Miles says

David Brin would make any shortlist of my favorite public intellectuals. He is a man of many quirks, a loquacious contrarian fond of bizarrely placed punctuation and enthusiastic but sometimes strained prose. Those qualities, which so often show up in personalities that grate the ear and bore the mind, somehow come together in Brin with a kind of obnoxious harmony, one that taunts readers almost as much as it seduces them.

The Transparent Society is Brin's only nonfiction book, and while it is too dated to cite as a useful reference for understanding the details of the contemporary privacy debate, the central claims are as relevant as they were when the book was first published in 1998. Brin takes a hard look at the assumption—held by liberals, conservatives, and libertarians alike—that personal privacy in all its forms is a right worth fighting for, and finds it wanting. It's not that Brin thinks personal privacy isn't valuable, just that...well, it's complicated. While that answer is in some ways a cop out, it's also a hallmark of Brin's approach, one that is both annoying and an indicator of his genuine desire to avoid oversimplification. Even if he does fail to paint the perfect picture of how we might shine a light into all the dark places where societal ills take root, Brin offers a set of highly unique and useful methods for framing the privacy debate.

The first of these is the idea that the desirable elements of modern society are all predicated, at least in some way, on the continued existence of public spaces in which citizens can debate whatever they like with impunity. Put more simply, criticism is the only known antidote to error. Societies must jealously safeguard the free expression of citizens because collective critique is the best way to foresee mistakes and fix existing problems. This aspect of neo-Western culture, Brin argues, is what truly sets us apart from the monarchies and feudal systems of the past (as well as those still existing around the world), in which dissent was traditionally dealt with via ostracism, torture and death. While I think it is important to acknowledge this positive development, I also don't think it's particularly insightful. Where Brin's argument is new to me, however, is how he uses freedom of expression as a background for understanding the issue of privacy. He contends that privacy, while important for many reasons, is not something that is worth giving up certain freedoms for. He also rejects the suggestion that we should spend huge amounts of time and resources on elaborate encryption methods when we've yet to discover any kind of cryptographic system that can't be hacked. Instead, Brin propounds a Transparent Society, one in which cameras are ubiquitous and most kinds of personal information are readily available to anyone who cares to inquire.

Before you reject this idea out of hand, as I'll admit wanting to do myself, consider the crucial point that the Transparent Society, if enacted properly, would empower normal citizens to get information about and keep track of public officials and important players in private industry. Given the high probability that people with enough power and money can already find out anything they want about average folks, Brin's proposal doesn't seem like such a bad deal. I'd definitely be okay with certain elements of my personal life being open to public scrutiny in exchange for access to *real* information about individuals running for public office or chatting in corporate boardrooms. In the world of two-way transparency between normal people and the elite, the elite have much more to lose. And they know it, which is why I believe Brin's ideas haven't had much traction in the decade and a half since this book's publication.

The details of exactly what information would be available in this kind of system should be a matter of lively debate, but I find it difficult to argue that some version of this scenario isn't preferable to what we have now, with the NSA enjoying virtually unfettered access to personal information and private companies collecting huge amounts of private data in exchange for free services. It's hard to imagine something like the 2008 housing crash happening if private banks were mandated to open their books to the public in exchange for the privilege of lending in public markets. We have much to gain from collectively keeping an eye on such entities (both public and private), and they have comparatively little to gain from watching us (which we know they can already do, thanks to Edward Snowden). Imagine the telescreen from *1984*, except that it's a two-way camera that allows you not only to see if anyone is watching you at any given moment, but also to track the behaviors and movements of your observers. Suddenly Orwell's dystopia seems far less menacing (though, admittedly, still a bit weird!).

Another useful way Brin thinks about privacy is using what he calls the "T-cell analogy," which likens a properly functioning critical populace to the human immune system. The immune system is not a top-down hierarchy in which subservient cells report to a central authority organ responsible for bodily health. Rather, it is a distributed system of highly diversified and specialized cells that individually patrol the body, searching for intruders or aberrations and setting off chemical "alarms" when they come across something they perceive to be dangerous. According to Brin, a vibrant and robust human society functions in the same way, with vast numbers of individuals trained, either professionally or through avocational pursuits, to sniff out errors and alert the rest of the population to potential problems. It's not a perfect system, but if the basic model was good enough to get humans through millions of years of evolution, there's probably something to it. And just as the immune system can itself be targeted by auto-immune diseases like AIDS, "T-cell" individuals can misfire in plenty of ways that can cause more mayhem than beneficence. The analogy has its limits, but I think it's a great way to illustrate the problem, and it also provides a positive narrative for people dedicated to self-education and cultural critique. People take pride in learning how to do things well, and even amateur-expertise usually comes with the added bonus of being able to detect when someone else is doing shoddy work or peddling snake oil.

All this contributes to the creation and maintenance of "reciprocal accountability," which Brin identifies as the backbone of a hale democracy. When hordes of educated people are allowed to see into one another's metaphorical (and literal) backyards, the result isn't just a lot of gossip, but also a kind of finicky progress. As time goes on, we get more comfortable with each other and become thankful for the absence of misdeeds that previously would have taken place behind closed doors or heady firewalls. Such an open world could certainly make public debate even messier than it is already, and we may go through periods of political deadlock like we've seen in recent years, but that still seems better to me than allowing elites to dictate from behind state podiums or corporate desktops. It's not a zero-sum game in which some people win while others lose, and not a world of forcing ourselves to accept simplified trade-offs between liberty and privacy, but something richer and more baffling where the benefits of openness are zealously democratized. This future is not an easy one, but it's more hopeful than one in which money and influence continue to buy better toys and increased access while people of normal means become ever more detached from society's actual workings.

As I'm sure you can tell, Brin more or less won me over. Many of his arguments seemed crazy at first, but Brin's reasoning helped me see that he really is on to something. I don't think this book is particularly well-written, and I also think most of the concrete examples, which were relevant in the late 90s, are probably not as salient as they once were. Brin admits his own frustration at not being able to prescribe specific courses of action to bring the Transparent Society into being, but it's hard to ask that kind of thing from just one man. In keeping with his general approach, Brin thinks it will take a multitude of smart, dedicated, and diverse people to generate a movement powerful enough to bring our collective demons into the light. I agree with him.

Bria says

This may be a 4-star book, but I was tempted to give it 5 stars just for David Brin himself. It's not quite as rare as one might think to have pretty good ideas and opinions about things, as David Brin does. What's especially rare, that David Brin has, is to not just be smart about things, but to *not be a dick about it*. Even if you don't care about privacy, even if you don't think it's worth your time to read a book about the internet from the time before the internet was really the internet, you should read this book if only to absorb the personality and style of David Brin. He is truly, actually, open-minded, and thoughtfully considers all sides he can think of to an issue, and remembers that there's probably more points that he hasn't come up with. He presents his thoughts as well-argued as he can manage, which is quite well, but reminds us and remains open to the distinct possibility that there is always more to be found out that could change his mind. He notices discrepancies and hypocrisies and contradictions with a highly admirable astuteness, and points them out, but in a gentle and genial way, completely devoid of the vitriol and self-righteousness that almost any other such account contains at least one dose of. Maybe I don't even agree with him as much as I think, it's just that he presents his ideas in the most outstandingly reasonable, agreeable, pleasant way that it feels like agreement, since he leaves so much room for discussion. He does have an aim and some ideas and opinions to disseminate, but half the point is really just for everybody to talk about things. It makes me want him to be a part of every discussion ever held on the planet.

Brin's discussion of how we are trained to be individuals is one that I think is to this day not engaged in nearly enough, and highlights so many intriguing facets of our society that I can only hope he has more books on the subject. Despite being primarily about the internet, this book doesn't feel like it's 13 years old, which is really quite remarkable. Did they even HAVE the internet in 1999? The only things that really date it are his choices of examples, and that he talks about things like the reaction to 9/11 and the 'percolation' state of art as if they haven't already happened. A lot of the key things about encryption and so forth I don't know whether or not they've even been implemented, so I can't rate how accurate his predictions were, although they were hardly even predictions, just plausible possibilities. It calls to mind another book written around the same time, *The Age of Spiritual Machines* by Ray Kurzweil, which very deliberately made predictions for 10 years in the future, and yet was not nearly so accurate as the not-even-trying-to-predict speculations in this book. I guess that what happens when you're actually open minded and not just going around trying to convince everybody how smart you are. Still a very relevant book, that actually makes you feel kind of hopeful for humanity, at least if it contains more David Brins. Maybe I'll send him a fruit basket.

K.R. Baucherel says

Visionary, and incredibly relevant as encryption begins to fail and we have to turn back to trust and transparency.

Jenny says

A great thought experiment on the antithesis of the idea that privacy is sacred. Even if the book doesn't change your mind about the right to privacy (What is privacy? Is it the ideal?) it will at least make you think about it. This book is one that consistently informs my outlook on the world and society.

I would give this 5 stars except that the last few chapters lose their focus a bit. I got most information from the first 50-60% of the book, and the rest didn't really add much. Update: I gave it 5 stars because I think it is an important topic.

I would love to see David Brin update this with a new edition. I don't think the premise is substantially changed, but we've continued to see privacy and watchdog issues play out in our national discourse. We need to see the counter-argument get more visibility: we don't protect our privacy by restricting access; rather we protect it by watching the watchers.

A revised edition might give Brin the chance to tighten up the writing as well.

Mark Oppenlander says

In a society where technology has made it possible to track nearly every action of nearly every citizen, is there any place left for privacy? Or is privacy a myth? And are there things more important than privacy? Noted science fiction author, futurist and scientist David Brin tackled these questions in this 1998 book. Some recent reviewers have commented on the fact that Brin's ideas and argument have been outpaced by changes in technology and news headlines (e.g. Edward Snowden) over the past two decades, but the basic premise of the book is philosophical and remains relevant, despite changes in how the ideas might have to be applied to current situations.

Brin's basic premise is that in a world of increasingly powerful tools for disrupting privacy, it becomes more important to protect freedom through mutual accountability than to protect privacy. Clinging to privacy (or anonymity) only enables those who have disproportionate power to use the aforementioned tools with impunity. Brin suggests that those who have more power than most are the government, corporate interests, the wealthy and even those who are part of the technological elite (hackers, programmers, etc.) The average citizen will be at a disadvantage to these powerful forces in scenarios that favor privacy; the shadows hide indiscretion more readily if you have the money, power or skills to know how to use them. Brin also points out that most arguments on the topic of protecting privacy point to only one bogeyman - the government, corporate interests, hackers, etc. - at the expense of others. Thus, interest groups suggest strategies that hobble their particular enemy while letting the other potential abusers of power go free. Hackers attack the government, government tries to control business, businesses hunt down hackers, etc.

Brin instead calls for mutual accountability. A transparent society would be one in which we all have the same (or similar) access to information about each other and where we all become both watchers and watched. The theory has a close relationship to the concept in criminology that social pressure is the greatest deterrent to aberrant or anti-social behaviors. The goal would be for no privacy law to be passed or privacy right to be granted that privileges one group in society ahead of another. We would all have equal (or nearly equal) ability to "spy" on each other. This ideal is a bit utopian, but Brin makes a compelling argument for it. He spends much of the book discussing alternate solutions that have been suggested by others and pointing out the flaws in those options. He also readily acknowledges that he believes in the ideals of transparency and freedom over privacy, he does not have perfect suggestions on how to implement these ideas at a policy level. He offers a few suggestions, but stops short of making any one idea a panacea or even suggesting that it should be normative. He is more interested in the principals than in specific policies.

The book is probably longer than it needs to be; Brin is nothing if not thorough. But the point of view which he is promoting deserves further consideration. The one thing I think that has changed since Brin wrote this

book is the proliferation of bad information in the world. Brin assumed that openness would lead to greater accountability, which makes sense. But when the airwaves and internet are being inundated with unreliable information, how does one sort the wheat from the chaff? I think Brin needs to write a sequel and this time, he'll need to talk about "fake news" and how we hold powerful people and organizations accountable when all information sources are not created equal.

All in all, this is a worthwhile read. And it's less dated than I would have imagined.

Doug Farren says

It's dated--20 years dated as a matter of fact. But, this book is a prophetic read of how a brilliant writer has correctly predicted the future of how technology can be used. Mr. Brin's extensive vocabulary and unique writing style makes this book a difficult read at times but well worth the effort. If you skim through a paragraph and realize you haven't a clue as to what was just discussed, go back and read it again-slower. Mr. Brin does not attempt to force a single view on the reader. The book presents the pros and cons of how our advancing technology can change our world and leaves it up to the reader to come to the final decision as to the path we should take.

It might be 20 years old, but it's still a very good read.

Matthew Aujla says

David Brin's *The Transparent Society* lays out the hypothesis that freedom can only be ensured through accountability, derived from openness and criticism, of those in power (i.e., governments, MNCs, "management," etc...). As we enter the information age, new technologies provide increasingly powerful tools for openness. Despite our desire to selectively endorse, to ensure accountability, and constrain, in light of privacy concerns, these tools through regulation or censorship of information, inevitably innovation will create ubiquitous and undetectable devices to capture and store information. Brin presents the choice between allowing only those in power access to these technologies and making these technologies available to everyone. Under the second scenario, a "transparent society" guarantees freedom through the accountability of those in power.

Brin develops a strong case for the value of accountability through openness and criticism by contrasting open democratic ideals of Pericles, Locke, and Jefferson with the closed fascist ideology of Hitler and Stalin. He argues that transparency is increasing in the information age by citing anecdotal examples of the surveillance technology, from video cameras on Baltimore streets and Safeway databases of shopping records to low-flying drones developed by the US military and subdural transponders that can be inserted in humans. Furthermore, he describes society's desire to use these technological tools for curiosity's sake, safety (exposing muggers hiding in the dark) and convenience (ensuring that the local grocery store has enough Coca-Cola). Finally, Brin supports his advocacy of a transparent society under these conditions with the compelling example of the inevitability of management watching employees and choice of letting or not letting stakeholders watch management whose actions may have much greater implications for the company's success or failure.

There are two tenuous assumptions in Brin analysis: on one side that technology will inescapably outpace the

ability of governments to secure privacy and on the other side that sufficient reciprocal transparency can be assured in a transparent society. Brin simply equates numerous new methods for capturing and storing information with the inability to concurrently regulate privacy and guarantee liberty. Brin fails to explain why the transparent society model assures the latest innovative technologies will be available to all instead of just those in power.

The Transparent Society engages the discussion on freedom and privacy in the information age with a provocative argument for accountability through openness to protect liberty. However, greater justification of the government's inability to secure privacy and the transparent society's ability to enable sufficient reciprocal transparency is required to tighten the case.

Asha says

A very interesting premise, and from a point of view I hadn't considered before, but ultimately it didn't need to be as long as it was. The structure of the book was basically a central idea which then got poked by a stick from a dozen different angles.

Three stars for changing the way I think... and for proving how very far technology has come even since 1998!! Brin's summary of the functions and capabilities of the Internet are no end of amusing: 'you can even play [text-based:] RPGs involving hundreds of people'. These days it's millions, and graphic-based, and World of Warcraft-esque. 'Low-cost voice communication from computer to computer' - now it's Skype and free and video conferencing for the masses.

(PS - I say this as a huge fan of David Brin's science fiction and also of his shorter essays. I get the impression he's just an essay-length thinker when it comes to academic narrative and writing a book was biting off more than he could chew.)

Dave Peticolas says

What I love about David Brin is his optimism. He reminds us that, although things are far from perfect, they are much better now than in the past, thanks in large part to democracy and pragmatic empiricism.

In this book, Brin takes on the 'cypherpunk' credo that privacy and anonymity, as provided by the modern tools of encryption, are the keys to our freedom. Brin question not only the feasibility of obtaining true anonymity, but also whether we should want it at all. His main argument is that democracy has thrived to date largely because of transparency, not privacy, and that true freedom will come from reciprocal transparency when anyone who wants to watch us gets watched in return.

Richard Derus says

Rating: 4.5* of five

David Brin LIKES my review! *complete fanboy SQUEEEEEEEEE*

The Publisher Says: ?In New York and Baltimore, police cameras scan public areas twenty-four hours a day.

?Huge commercial databases track your finances and sell that information to anyone willing to pay.

?Host sites on the World Wide Web record every page you view, and "smart" toll roads know where you drive.

Every day, new technology nibbles at our privacy. Does that make you nervous? David Brin is worried, but not just about privacy. He fears that society will overreact to these technologies by restricting the flow of information, frantically enforcing a reign of secrecy. Such measures, he warns, won't really preserve our privacy. Governments, the wealthy, criminals, and the techno-elite will still find ways to watch us.

But we'll have fewer ways to watch them. We'll lose the key to a free society: accountability. *The Transparent Society* is a call for "reciprocal transparency." If police cameras watch us, shouldn't we be able to watch police stations? If credit bureaus sell our data, shouldn't we know who buys it? Rather than cling to an illusion of anonymity—a historical anomaly, given our origins in close-knit villages—we should focus on guarding the most important forms of privacy and preserving mutual accountability. The biggest threat to our freedom, Brin warns, is that surveillance technology will be used by too few people, not by too many.

A society of glass houses may seem too fragile. Fearing technology-aided crime, governments seek to restrict online anonymity; fearing technology-aided tyranny, citizens call for encrypting all data. Brin shows how, contrary to both approaches, windows offer us much better protection than walls; after all, the strongest deterrent against snooping has always been the fear of being spotted. Furthermore, Brin argues, Western culture now encourages eccentricity—we're programmed to rebel! That gives our society a natural protection against error and wrong-doing, like a body's immune system.

But "social T-cells" need openness to spot trouble and get the word out. *The Transparent Society* is full of such provocative and far-reaching analysis. The inescapable rush of technology is forcing us to make new choices about how we want to live. This daring book reminds us that an open society is more robust and flexible than one where secrecy reigns. In an era of gnat-sized cameras, universal databases, and clothes-penetrating radar, it will be more vital than ever for us to be able to watch the watchers.

With reciprocal transparency we can detect dangers early and expose wrong-doers. We can gauge the credibility of pundits and politicians. We can share technological advances and news. But all of these benefits depend on the free, two-way flow of information.

My Review: In his blog, **Contrary Brin**, the author posted a wonderful article today, called A Transparency Tsunami!, treating the latest advance in malefactor detection—and not coincidentally, social control. It's face recognition technology, using public database images and traffic cameras and surveillance videos from all imaginable public places to build a file of your very own physog. For, of course, your comfort and convenience. After all, you're safer when Big Brother knows where you are, who you're with, what you're getting up to. Right? And, since *you* aren't doing anything wrong, nothing criminal, what's the problem?

Tell that to the cops who come haul you to court for feeding the meter. Tell that to the IRS agent who demands to know where the money for that bracelet you bought at the mall came from when you're behind on your taxes. (And best hope your wife doesn't overhear.) Look (!), they already know what kind of porn you watch via your ISP and even how long it takes you to...get there...since no one watches past the, uh, crisis point. You want them to know you chiseled a Girl Scout out of an extra box of Thin Mints, too?

Brin's point, in this book and in that blog post, is that they know it and they ain't gonna un-know it. He wants our surveillance state, so heartily endorsed by the best Republican president we've had since 1956 by the name of Obama via his reauthorization of the USA-PATRIOT Act, to be looked BACK at: Sousveillance, the only practical protection against surveillance:

The article in the *New York Times* spirals downward into a list of begged-for impossibilities, never once considering the real issue...which is not how to blind elites (a utopian notion never achieved by any society in history and impossible today, as cameras proliferate faster than Moore's Law.) Rather, the solution is to limit what authorities can do to us with such systems. And to accomplish that, we need only get into the habit of looking back. Of embracing the tech waves and ensuring that no cop, no public official, goes un-recognized, unwatched.

What could be more obvious? To work with tech trends instead of (futilely) against them? But the well-meaning activists, though properly worried, never stretch their minds in a new direction. The only direction that can work.

Contrary Brin 26 September 2013, "Face Recognition Has Arrived...Smile!"

What Brin advocates is NOT LYING STILL, not shutting up or shutting down or shutting out reality, but engaging in the business of being a citizen and calling the Powers That Be to task by doin' unto them others what them others is doin' to you.

I expect that has a familiar ring to it. It's always been good advice. It's never been more crucial to follow.

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Mark says

This book needs to be prefaced with the caveat that it was written over 17 years ago now - published prior to 9-11, pre-Snowden, and therefore many of its optimistic disclaimers as to the trust citizens can place in a government not to abuse its possible powers have been proven false, and indeed, are still very much to worry over. Brin's chirpy optimism that a correlative "transparent society" where "the watchers themselves get watched" is disingenuous since any watcher will go to greater and greater lengths to assure they can't be, and that they can continue their covert ability to watch YOU.

Nevertheless the book does mention a number of applications of the internet and cyberspace which are indeed in play, and have come to be more, and more in play, since the fear culture took over in the West after 9-11. But its very datedness makes it a difficult read, knowing what all has actually happened, in hindsight. Now it may well be true that Brin often took "contrarian positions" on much of this on purpose, in order to stimulate people's thinking and stir more debate on the issue, which for 1998 admittedly was a bit prescient. (Brin's use of the first attempted bombing of the World Trade Center towers as an example: "imagine if they had succeeded!" seems a bit close for comfort in that regard!) But all the same, and for all that, it is hard to put a finger on just exactly where Brin's head and heart were when he wrote this (with "us"? or with "them?") and it would be interesting to read a new and revised preface to this in some future edition.

He equivocates far too much on the behalf of those who would prefer security to liberty. I am sure others will disagree, but, this is the conclusion I came to after plowing along through it.

