



## Book Review

Bennett, Colin. 2008. *The Privacy Advocates: Resisting the Spread of Surveillance*. Cambridge: MIT University Press.

259 pp, Hardcover, \$28.00 (US), ISBN-10: 0262026384.

### Abraham Newman

Edmund Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA.

*Privacy Advocates* is the first full-length monograph dedicated to the identities and activities of the private citizens who commit themselves to the struggle of protecting privacy and limiting abusive surveillance. As such, it offers critical insight into the groups that lead these efforts, the individuals behind these organizations, and the strategies they use. Based on numerous participant interviews, the book dialogues with those actually engaged in these fights and presents their narrative in a thoughtful, respectful, and provocative prose.

While there has been an explosion of research on personal privacy since the early 1990s, the majority of this work has focused on legal analyses. These contributions have done an excellent job detailing the legislative rules and agencies governing privacy, potential extra-legal solutions (e.g. privacy seals or chief privacy officers), international agreements (e.g. the Safe Harbor Agreement between the US and the European Union), and government efforts to expand surveillance. As such, privacy scholars know a lot about the rules, tools, and threats – how they differ across country and how they have changed since the reassertion of security concerns in the wake of international terrorism.

Nevertheless, relatively scant work has focused on the *agents* that mobilize and struggle to promote personal freedom and protest unnecessary surveillance. As such a new wave of research has begun to examine the actors and individuals that serve as privacy entrepreneurs, who inject their concerns into public policy and social interactions. The policy network engaged in privacy protection includes a diverse range of actors spanning the public and private sectors, working within their home countries and transnationally. This line of research then examines the actors involved, their motivations and political resources, and their effect on society. Bennett's work not only adds to this important research agenda but explores perhaps the least understood group involved – non-governmental privacy advocates.

In a significant contribution to privacy scholarship, the book constructs a set of typologies that organize the groups and individuals involved and their strategies. Advocacy groups are not solely comprised of single-issue privacy organizations but include those dedicated alternatively to the protection of civil liberties, human rights, consumer protection, and digital communities. And their commitment to the cause stems from varying motivations such as humanistic commitments to human dignity, political beliefs about privacy in a democratic society, and instrumental gains from having proper protections. This diverse range of actors uses a number of tactics common to advocacy work—providing information, leveraging symbols, holding others accountable to their commitments, and shaming those that undermine privacy. What becomes clear from the first several chapters is that there is not a single path to engagement.

The final chapters, which focus on a series of case studies, the interactions among network participants, and the future of the movement, leave the reader with a mixed image of how privacy advocates engage their social and political realities. While a number of individuals persistently fight for the cause, their

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efforts have not universally succeeded. Bennett intentionally labels his protagonists advocates and not a movement. Rarely relying on broad membership, these groups are often small collections of experts that translate complex technical and policy issues into actionable policy instruments. The network itself is not always a harmonious lot but is also rife with internal disputes. *Privacy Advocates* ends with hopeful admiration but also realistic skepticism about the challenges ahead.

Given the dearth of previous work on the subject, *Privacy Advocates* will no doubt spark a new interest in research on political mobilization and agency around privacy and sets out the path for a bold new research agenda. Core issues to be explored in follow-on work are the boundary conditions that such advocates face. When are they more likely to be successful, why might they choose one political strategy over another, and under what circumstances are they brought into a larger alliance. In particular, I want to highlight three areas that I think are particularly promising: Agendas, Alliances, and Environments.

The first considers both the content and timing of advocacy influence. How do the demands of the community differ across groups and actors? Given these demands, at what stage of the policy-making process are they likely to achieve their goals? A considerable amount of research on epistemic communities suggests that experts are best poised to influence public policy in complex technical settings during the agenda setting phase. Yet, privacy advocates have also been successful in blocking the implementation of surveillance efforts (e.g. the data retention debate in Germany). Under what conditions are advocates well positioned to shape different parts of the policy-making process? In order to study questions of agenda setting and influence over the course of the policy process, research will have to consider failed advocacy attempts as well as successes.

A second promising research field examines the relationship between privacy advocates and other possible allies. Bennett notes the possible relationship between civil society actors and data privacy authorities and industry privacy officers. Although there has been speculation about possible crowding out as well as reinforcing synergies between these different actors, scant research has actively explored the collaborations and failures among the broader policy network. In particular, it would be interesting to explore the conditions under which alliances form across groups and when they cut at cross purposes. Anecdotal evidence suggests that California's data breach reporting law has helped privacy advocates, for example. Similarly, advocates such as State Watch and Privacy International have bolstered the efforts of European data privacy authorities in many EU debates. Not only should this research explore success and failure of such collaboration but also how they might alter the goals of the actors involved. In short, what compromises do these alliances demand?

Finally, research should investigate the interaction between different political environments and privacy advocacy. It seems logical that variation in core political institutions such as federalism, parliamentary arrangement, or political economy coordination will affect the types of actors that advocate, the strategies they employ, and the types of impact that they may wield. In corporatist or negotiated systems, for example, one would expect a lesser role for independent non-profits compared to corporate privacy officers that get represented in more general coordination mechanisms. Similarly, high impact litigation and class action mechanisms available in common law countries opens doors to strategies that are relatively limited in statutory systems. The broader political environment surely does not predetermine the outcome but it constrains and enables certain behavior, which advocates might hope to pursue.

Given the considerable incentives pushing business and governments to expand data collection and surveillance, it becomes essential to focus our attention on those committed to rebalancing the equation. *Privacy Advocates* fills a critical void in this effort.