

# Snowden and Berners-Lee's campaign for an open internet

March 13 2014, by Robbie Fordyce

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Who's watching you? Credit: Louish Pixel/Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND

You might have seen this week that there's a campaign regarding the future of the internet. Its chief proponents? NSA whistleblower [Edward Snowden](#), inventor of the web [Tim Berners-Lee](#), journalist [Glenn Greenwald](#) and privacy researcher [Christopher Soghoian](#).

While this sounds like a masculinist flight of fancy, more appropriate for films such as [Tron](#) or [The Matrix](#), there is a legitimate concern here –

and it's being raised by many more than just these four individuals.

The nature of the internet, such as we know it, is being quietly fought over in the departments of [security agencies](#), legislative chambers, sites such as [GitHub](#) and [SourceForge](#) and in the online exchanges of the digital transaction networks.

The future of the internet is being staked over what is legally permissible for companies and governments to do, as much as it is over the capabilities that software and hardware have.

These people seek to fight back against what they see as a tide of governmental and corporate control over an international communications system that many believe should belong to the global people.

The fight is, however, extremely complex.

Changes to the internet are being made on both technical and legal fronts, and what is at stake is as much a case of free access to the internet as it is over the freedom to say what one wants.

Legal battles are more apparent. Some readers may remember the Stop Online Piracy Act ([SOPA](#)) and Protect Intellectual Property Act ([PIPA](#)) protests, which led to blackouts on Wikipedia and Google.

Other readers may be familiar with the repeated threats to network neutrality. These were popular protests against changes to [internet infrastructure](#), and were successful mainly because large communications organisations contributed. These organisations are not always on our side, as I have mentioned in the past.

The problem with these changes, as well as the changes being fought by

Snowden and others, is that they are largely subtle and less than immediate in their consequences. Or, if they are immediate, it's hard to determine their effects.

## Ed drops in to SXSW

Snowden's video (see below) at annual music, film, and interactive conference South by Southwest ([SXSW](#)) on precisely this point goes to show some of the technical problems involved in obtaining freedom of speech through the internet – the original video is choppy, with severe sound issues, due to the systems setup that was used to ensure the connection was resistant to intrusion.

For Snowden, the problem is that the average user needs access to software with a better set of privacy controls, which is easy to use, in order to make it more difficult and more expensive for the shadow cabals of global security agencies to track us all collectively.

There are many tools available for us, as private users, to secure our communications:

- off-the-record chat programs such as [Pidgin](#) are multiplatform encrypted chat programs which replace systems such as Google Chat
- Diaspora can replace many of the functions of Facebook
- connections via [Tor](#) can do a great deal to [prevent excess snooping](#)
- [Duck Duck Go](#) is a great search engine that has proven its ability to draw a profit without harvesting user data. OpenPGP, when managed properly, will help protect emails
- the [Redecentralize](#) group hosts many more attempts.

But the question is, now that I've given you these resources, will you

actually change your habits? As Soghoian notes during the SXSW dialogue with Snowden, "rational users" don't install a whole heap of security devices.

Why would you change your behaviour, when trading data about yourself, your family and your friends seems like a good deal for easier use of the internet? But equally, why should you give up this information when you don't have to?

As Soghoian adds in the video, the political spectrum can change. Irrespective of where you sit in the political spectrum, you'll inevitably loathe one of the governments in power, and not trust them with your data, whether they are state or federal.

Indeed, it's worth thinking about whether you trust all of the other governments in the world, as the [US](#), [Canada](#) and [Britain](#) are on record for their international spy regimes, and undoubtedly many others are as well.

### **So what *do* we want?**

This leads to what I consider to be the most interesting of the campaign features – Sir Timothy Berners-Lee's [Web We Want](#) campaign.

He proposes an online Magna Carta – a global document to challenge the legal rulings of those states which are determined to control the internet against the wishes of people of the world.

This campaign may not be able to achieve exactly what it sets out to do, but it speaks to an idea of a change in culture about the internet; that maybe the united citizens of the world may be able to challenge systems of surveillance and contractions in the internet's usability.

Importantly, the campaign isn't about overthrowing control – it's about changing how the government and the people work together in the future, making the government more transparent through digital means, as well as guaranteeing continued access to the internet for its citizens.

Snowden, Berners-Lee, Greenwald and Soghoian are simply the most vocal international figureheads for a disparate and global movement of coders, politicians, lawyers, researchers and activists.

Others, including Australians such as Matthew Rimmer ([@DrRimmer](#)) and [Asher Wolf](#) ([@Asher\\_Wolf](#)), have a great deal to contribute on legal and technical concerns, respectively, about the internet.

While we could just lie back with our iPhones and simply accept these intrusions into what has become our daily lives, I would suggest that people become conscious of the technologies that they use, and the ends to which their computers are being put by other parties.

The future of the [internet](#) could still easily swing either into more data collection, more intrusion, and more breaches of privacy, as much as it could be freer, easier and cheaper to access.

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Citation: Snowden and Berners-Lee's campaign for an open internet (2014, March 13) retrieved 24 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-03-snowden-berners-lee-campaign-internet.html>

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