

INTERVIEW WITH SIMON DAVIES



Simon Davies will be a guest researcher at the Amsterdam Platform for Privacy Research (www.appr.uva.nl) and the Institute for Information Law (www.ivir.nl) for six months. Simon is one of the world's most experienced privacy specialists and has been involved in the field for 26 years, both as an academic and as an advocate. In 1990 he founded the watchdog NGO Privacy International, of which he was Director General until 2012. In that role he and his team pioneered public awareness of privacy. Simon has also worked closely with the London School of Economics since 1997, initially as a lecturer and now as Associate



Director of the LSE's external division. He has written and campaigned extensively on issues ranging from identity systems, biometrics, communications interception and national security to cloud computing, data protection and Privacy by Design. He is visiting Amsterdam to undertake work on citizen engagement and campaign strategy.

The interview was held by Bart v/d Sloot of IViR

(Q) You've worked in the privacy field, both as an activist and as an academic, for decennia. Can you remember what was the first time that a privacy violation got your attention and why it angered you?

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I was about 14 years old and was attending a very conservative church school. The deputy headmaster decided to introduce random intimate searches of the boys - clothes, lockers, body searches. There was some vague justification about looking for stolen property, though nothing specific was ever mentioned. Frankly we figured it was less about crime and more about some staff being twisted sadists, but we were all used to that fact. Well something stirred within me and I started getting militant about this policy. It seemed to me to be entirely unjustified, unfair and disproportionate. So I organised a Students Representative Council, which - as you'd imagine -

the hierarchy were none too pleased about. Even at fourteen I was beginning to understand power relationships and started working the gulf between the liberal teachers and the autocratic staff to our benefit. Within a few months the Council had become the vehicle for radical staff to express their anger at the school. Then there was a kind of mini nuclear explosion when the parents intervened and started asking awkward questions about the search policy. It didn't last of course. The following year I was expelled. But I learned much about the core principles of privacy and activism, so the effort was worthwhile.

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(Q) You've recently been invited to give a lecture on the NSA affair. Why, do you think, are so few people interested in it and why should they care/what is at stake with the NSA?

I think it's natural for people in our field to instinctively understand the key issues involved in mass surveillance, but less easy for people who are just trying to get on with the challenges of normal life and taking in only snippets of the issue from headlines and so on. Just getting one's head wrapped around the magnitude and the complexity of this issue is difficult. And yes, it's true that in many countries there hasn't been an

outpouring of anger over the NSA revelations, but people are confused about the constant claims that all this is for our benefit. People want to believe that the authorities act in our best interest and to declare otherwise goes against the grain of how society functions.

What's at stake though is critically important. What we're talking about here goes to the heart of power in government. It goes to the heart of accountability and trust. American opinion leaders often understand this more than do their European counterparts. What's perhaps more important though is the danger of creating surveillance – an inescapable web.

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Democracy and freedom occupy only tiny slivers of human history and we're allowing ourselves to become hostages to fortune by building this edifice.

(Q) As an activist, you've generated many campaigns and participated in a wide range of protests. What would you consider your greatest success so far?

That's a tough one to answer. I've run vast campaigns that have shaken governments and shifted the psyche of nations, but these haven't necessarily been great long term successes.

Campaigns can be judged on a wide range of criteria.

If I had to have one campaign chiselled on my gravestone though I'd say it would have to be the fight against the British national identity card. At the time - and this stretched over several years in the mid 2000's - we were against unimaginable odds, Public opinion was well on the side of a relentless government that had made this scheme one of its core policies.

The reason I say that campaign is notable is because it was executed with strategic skill at an almost military level of precision. "Strike an

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emperor, strike to kill" as the saying goes, and we hit the government so hard that it never recovered. When you end up with the Prime Minister and most of the Cabinet slagging you off personally in Parliament and the media you know you've won more than just a moral victory. We shifted the mindset of government though, and stopped the inevitable drift of that bad policy across the world.

(Q) You're now in Amsterdam to write a book in which you revise and update Saul Alinsky's Rules for Radicals. What are these rules, how are you planning to update them and could

you given an example of one of your rules?

Alinsky was one of the most creative and successful campaigners for social justice in American history. Just before he died in 1971 he published a series of principles for campaigning, which he called "Rules for Radicals". Many of them were centred on campaign planning and execution.

Well that was over forty years ago and while most of the rules have stood the test of time it's clear we've moved into a new era where organised protest is more difficult and uncertain. The rise of globalisation, information and the

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collapse of ideology means that in many realms there simply isn't the social bandwidth to deal with complex issues. We need to update the rules to create a more flexible, individual-centred and measurable type of campaign.

One good and simple example of the rules in action would be "If your issue can't be expressed in a six-word headline, you have a thesis, not a campaign".

Bart van de Sloot



Simon Davies with Noam Chomsky