

Summer 2011

UA68/8 History Alumni Newsletter

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SUMMER, 2011

James T. Baker, Editor • John Hardin, Photographer

A HISTORY LUMNI NEWSLETTER

Privacy in America Glimpses of a Modern History

2011 Harrison Lecture

This year's Harrison Lecturer was Sarah Igo from Vanderbilt University. She is a graduate of Harvard and Princeton, and her book *The Averaged American* won high acclaim and a number of national awards. At WKU she spoke on "Privacy in America: Glimpses of a Modern History," which is the subject of her next book. After her presentation she and her WKU History Department host, Thea Browder engaged in the following dialogue.



Browder: What do you mean when you say that privacy has a history?

Igo: According to the organization Privacy International, privacy is "one of the most important human rights issues of the modern age." Privacy may now be an international concern and even a global right. However, it would be a mistake to treat it as an abstraction, unmoored by time, circumstance, and place. My research indicates that privacy was conceptualized quite particularly—politically, culturally, and even psychologically—in the twentieth-century United States. It had concrete roots in historical developments and changed along with the context of the times. Given this, it makes sense to think of a matter-of-fact understanding of privacy at any given moment not as a right or principle (that is, as something that is already there, waiting to be discovered or violated), but rather as the outcome of very specific social processes.



History's annual spring lecture series was funded by and named for former Professor Lowell Harrison. He is pictured here with guests Marion Lucas, Glenn LaFantasie, and Carol Crowe-Carraco at his residence in Owensboro.

What's been striking to me is how extraordinarily malleable

understandings of privacy have been across the last century or so. Public understandings of privacy assumed recognizably different forms across the twentieth century: sometimes lighting on technological developments or domestic invasions, at others on physical bodies or official records. Aspects of everyday life that we now fully accept, like postcards and telephone calls, questions from survey organizations and intimate conversations between friends, psychological counseling and confessional poetry, were at one time seen as serious threats to privacy.

What is also notable is that Americans are constantly finding new privacy threats, both technological and cultural. Debates over the proper boundaries of privacy will, I think, always be with us. Even if they are at some level irresolvable, the history of such debates can help us gain a new understanding of how citizens think about their state and society, their rights, and their interactions with others. In fact, one could argue that privacy talk expresses a tension built into modern societies from the beginning: between expanding claims to personal inviolability and advancing methods of infringing it, and between the desire to be "let alone" and the urge to disclose and be known.

Precisely because privacy has been billed as a personal possession, outside the realm of the state or politics, its history can open an especially illuminating window onto the social strains of modern citizenship. Rather than simply lament privacy's disappearance, then, I propose that we notice when and where privacy appears in public. Rather than seeing only a crisis, we might be able to conceive of past and present negotiations over privacy as a seedbed for new social values.

Popular commentators regularly treat the bundle of ideas that comprise modern privacy as a transhistorical or ahistorical essence, as in the abstract "right" to privacy—itself a puzzle since no such right was enunciated in formal legal terms in the United



Sarah Igo and Thea Browder

States until 1890. Even historically minded observers tend to fix upon a single aspect of privacy, whether as a constitutional status, a base-line condition for liberal democracy, an aspect of the built environment, or a literary or psychological preoccupation. As a result, the two most prominent sorts of narratives about privacy—its eradication through state, workplace, and electronic surveillance, on the one hand, and its gradual triumph through hard-won criminal or reproductive rights, on the other—point toward radically opposed conclusions. If we accept either of these rather simplistic stories, we miss out on a deeper understanding of how Americans have come to terms with a culture and society that requires them at times to forfeit their personal privacy.

Browder: What other historical developments have shaped our experiences of, and fears about, privacy?

Igo: Privacy is a tricky historical subject precisely because it refers to those matters one hopes to keep out of the public eye, to those corners of life that are off limits or beyond scrutiny. By definition, privacy is somewhat intangible and elusive. Yet, at many points across the last century, privacy went public as it were, suddenly becoming visible in editorial pages, community hearings, and popular protests—whether in the guise of "instantaneous photographs," Social Security numbers, reproductive rights jurisprudence, or Facebook.

It seems clear that shifting social and political conditions, including changes in public mores, have most often triggered American anxieties about privacy. In the twentieth century, privacy fears were triggered not just by new surveillance methods like wiretapping or fingerprinting, but by a whole host of developments touching on nearly every aspect of public life. Public health initiatives, for example, were based on disclosing individual and community incidence of diseases. The growth of suburbia brought with it new forms of neighborliness as well as nosiness. The expanding welfare state required for its operation intensive record-keeping on citizens' earnings and employment. The rise of the helping professions like social work and psychiatry permitted strangers to intrude in novel ways into individuals' lives. Second-wave feminism, which argued that the "personal is political," ushered all kinds of formerly "private" and "domestic" issues like physical abuse and rape into the public domain. So too did political sex scandals push the private lives of prominent people into the public eye. Criminal and terrorist threats prompted new restrictions on individual liberties such as CCTV cameras and the Patriot Act.

Our Newest Colleague



We welcome to the department Selena Sanderfer. She is a graduate of Fisk (B.A.) and Vanderbilt (M.A., PhD) and will teach courses in the History of Africa, the Caribbean, and the Universal Slave Trade.

History Contest Brings Together Former And Future Students

Our March 25 history contest for public school students attracted over 900 participants. As the preliminary session began, Professor Marion Lucas greeted one of the teachers as the students he brought to compete gathered in the theater. Next year Marion will turn over the reins of the annual contest to the history department's liaison with regional schools, Tammy Van Dyken.



And of course, new technologies and media formats—very familiar to us today—regularly raised fears about how and what kind of personal information might be revealed to non-intimates.

This long list, to which many other developments could be added, suggests that privacy invasions were central to the ways Americans encountered the twentieth century. But concern over such invasions, as I suggested in my talk, also created new understandings of the person, and his or her boundaries and rights, in turn allowing for the elaboration of new privacies.

Browder: Is this modern era a period of unprecedented erosion of privacy?

Igo: Certainly if the titles of recent books—*The Electronic Eye*, *The End of Privacy*, *Database Nation*, *The Unwanted Gaze*, *The Naked Crowd*, *No Place to Hide*, *Privacy in Peril*, *The Road to Big Brother*—are to be trusted, Americans are in the midst of an unprecedented privacy crisis! In particular, commercial data mining and electronic surveillance, “recommendation software” and “identity theft,” have become the stuff of scandal and sensational media exposés.

I'm convinced that Americans are very worried about their privacy these days, but more skeptical that our current-day talk about privacy in crisis reflects

a substantive change in the amount of privacy citizens actually possess. Recent formulations of “the end of privacy” are not, in fact, particularly new. Each of the hot-button issues that drive public discussions of privacy today—whether virtual transgressions, unauthorized information flows, government or corporate surveillance of citizens, or even excessive personal disclosure—has ample historical precedents.

Moreover, in one light, citizens have many more legal protections and much more control today than they used to over their bodies, words, and records—although of course, one could argue that new laws have

failed to keep up with the dizzying number of privacy invasions possible in a world of ever-more sophisticated tracking technologies and means of surveillance. It has been suggested to me that the ability to extract information from genetic material, for example, is a kind of tipping point: that citizens will never be able to return to a world where their anonymity is complete.

I find this sort of argument intriguing, but it still seems to me that we miss something significant if we insist, as many do, that personal privacy has been on a clear and precipitous decline. This is especially problematic when we think about who has access to privacy, and privacy rights in 2011 as compared, say, to the late nineteenth century. In the United States, privacy was something to which a small elite were entitled a century ago. But across the last century, privacy has been democratized, so that immigrants, workers, women, students, and even children can claim certain privacy protections today. This is not to say, of course, that citizens have nothing to worry about when it comes to the security of their information, their identities, and their rights. It does, though, point to the need for a more precise (and yes, historical!) understanding of how Americans' beliefs—even deeply cherished ones about the rules of intimacy, boundaries of domestic space, and the integrity of the person—have been challenged and reorganized over time.

Dietle Reappointed

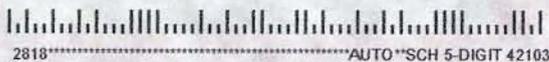
We would like to congratulate Robert Dietle on being reappointed to a second term as department chair. He is shown here giving awards to our outstanding majors at the May Phi Alpha Theta banquet.





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Question: Where Are They Now?
Answer: They Are Still Here.



You may occasionally wonder where your "old" professors are and what they are doing. Pictured here are members of the history department as they look today. After you have made an attempt to recognize them and remember their names, you may read from left to right, front row to back: Patti Minter, Selena Sanderfer, Robert Dietle, Thea Browder, Tony Harkins, Carol Crowe-Carraco, David Serafini, Chunmei Du; Rick Keyser, Juan Romero, Glenn LaFantasie, Rich Weigel, Tammy Van Dyken, Marc Eagle; Jennifer Walton-Hanley, Drew McMichael, Jack Thacker, John Hardin, Eric Reed.