

Book Review: The Known Citizen: A History of Privacy In Modern America by Sarah E. Igo

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Sarah E. Igo, *The Known Citizen: A History of Privacy In Modern America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018. Xii + 592 pages. Hardcover. \$35.00.

The Known Citizen: A History of Privacy In Modern America is the latest book from historian Sarah E. Igo, in which she traces the long history of privacy and its changing definition throughout much of the twentieth century within the United States. Igo argues that to understand privacy, we must disabuse ourselves of the notion that privacy has and continues to have a static definition. Instead, personal ideas and feelings surrounding privacy have generally experienced a degree of fluidity that was largely dependent upon broader societal and social factors. Igo thus attempts to approach privacy from a more personal level by focusing on how American citizens have understood and grappled with the notion of privacy as it evolved. From Victorian-era notions of propriety to Laud Humphreys' tearoom study to the social media boom of the twenty-first century, Igo provides an exhaustive account of how citizens have tackled the fine line between privacy and the desire to broadcast intimate details of one's life into the greater public domain.

Igo asserts that the inherent need to be known in part stems from the fact that knowledge of a person, over the course of the twentieth century, became increasingly tied to modern notions of citizenship and American identity. To be known, via Social Security, racial, sexual, even medical categorizations, or through political and religious affiliations, was to be a part of a broader national collective. Of course, these categorizations came with a degree of privilege and hierarchy. Heterosexual white Americans could exert the right to privacy, effectively enabling them to dictate how their private information was disclosed. Members of the LGBTQ+ community, people of color, and those within lower-class brackets did not have these privileges extended to them, and in their case, often had their private information distributed to lasting and damaging effects.

Thus, Igo's book provides a broader understanding of privacy and identity within modern America by moving away from traditional works on privacy that tend to focus on the state's

increasing presence in its citizen's everyday lives. However, Igo's approach to understanding privacy at a more personal level by looking at citizens' responses to the widening gap between the private and the public throughout modern American history is perhaps a bit too ambitious. There is too much ground to cover to include all voices within the discussion. As a result, Igo tends to rely on testimonies and evidence from white Americans throughout the book. Considering that for much of America's history people of color were in a unique position to be tracked by the government mainly as data (3/5ths compromise, Tuskegee, the War on Drugs, BLM social media tracking) while remaining virtually anonymous, a more inclusive study on people of color's definition of privacy and identity and how it differs from that of members of the white or white-passing community remains vital.

Likewise, Igo's approach to privacy and citizenship naturally relies heavily on American-Centrism. However, Americans have a long history of questioning and, at times deriding, Communist countries like Russia and China's use of privacy laws and often heavy-handed intrusion into their citizens and Western countries' private affairs. However, it is well known that the US government did and continues to participate in similar tactics. Why do Americans see our own government's intrusion into citizens' lives as beneficial rather than predatory? Why do Americans make this distinction when discussing privacy? Thus, it seems that a broader discussion of American national identity and privacy from a transatlantic perspective throughout the twentieth century, particularly during the Cold War Era, would have been highly beneficial.

Nevertheless, *Known Citizen* provides an excellent and extremely comprehensive overview of the history of privacy within modern America. It remains an essential and timely read for legal scholars, the political sciences, and socio-cultural historians who want to gain a broader

grasp on how Americans have lived, defined, and imagined privacy while still trying to maintain some modicum of control over their own identity throughout the twentieth century.

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