
THOMAS WELLS
Georgetown University

Abstract

Cory Doctorow’s Little Brother is more than just a sci-fi story about computer hackers. This paper is an attempt to identify the poor ethics of privacy at work in the book, and offer some alternatives that might produce a more fruitful conversation when exploring this subject.

In the opening sequence of the book, the young protagonist of Cory Doctorow’s Little Brother is illegally detained. He takes a brutal blow to the head from a riot cop and thinks: “I didn’t like these people. I decided right then, they would pay a price for all of this” (19). And they do. Using a variety of tools—jailbroken Xboxes, data encryption, and clever coding, he trips them up in every way that he can, waging a guerrilla war against sovereign power run amok. Little Brother is a thrilling tale, complete with a faceless, oppressive villain, a brilliant white-boy protagonist with a roster of multi-ethnic sidekicks, and occasional bits of gray morality sprinkled throughout. Doctorow outlines in his introduction that this is more than just a sci-fi story about computer hackers—this is real, and in reality, people are tortured, surveilled, tracked, and identified:

We don’t have to go down that road. If you love freedom, if you think the human condition is dignified by privacy, by the right to be left alone, by the right to explore your weird ideas provided you don’t hurt others, then you have common cause with the kids whose web-browsers and cell phones are being used to lock them up and follow them around (2).

But we have gone down that road, and we all helped to get us there. We’ve been there for a long time. Doctorow’s impotent rage about the fundamental freedoms guaranteed to Americans rings hallow when contrasted with the neoliberal message he espouses throughout the text. His arguments, masked in plucky freedom fighting teenagers, cover a privilege embedded deep within the American psyche—that somehow our freedom is better than other freedoms, that rebellion functions through the exercise of capital, and that there’s nothing more punk rock than telling old people to fuck off (there is a punk rock concert called “Don’t Trust Anyone Over 25” in the book).

If it isn’t evident, I don’t cotton to Doc-

1Jailbreaking is a form of privilege escalation: “Privilege escalation is the act of exploiting a bug, design flaw or configuration oversight in an operating system or software application to gain elevated access to resources that are normally protected from an application or user. The result is that an application with more privileges than intended by the application developer or system administrator can perform unauthorized actions” (wikipedia).
Doctorow’s vision of the world. It’s not because I think everyone is a terrorist, or because I think we should be monitoring anybody who vaguely fits into the abstracted and stereotyped category of terrorist, or because I think owning things is the worst thing that’s ever happened to Western civilization. Violating the privacy of another is unethical—it displays a contempt for consent. My issue is with Doctorow’s use of his characters as vehicles for his reasoning, which as I’ve said, is deeply embedded in privilege. While there are those who exploit power and use it to dominate, control, and injure, my problem lies with the creation of faceless villains in a world filled with faces. Faceless villains protect us from the vulnerability required to face the villain inside all of us, the potential villain, they protect us from having to work through our complacency with our own oppression. This paper is an attempt to identify the poor ethics of privacy at work within Little Brother, and offer some alternatives that might produce a more fruitful conversation when exploring this subject.

Doctorow’s text centers on Marcus Yallow, a 17-year-old teenager whose world transforms after a terrorist attack on the San Francisco Bay Bridge. Marcus and his friends are illegally detained at “Gitmo-by-the-bay,” a fictional version with strong echoes of Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib prison. Marcus is assaulted, deprived of light, food, and water, and forced to piss himself. He vows revenge on the DHS, and after his release, begins to wage a guerilla war on the organization. As he fights, a coming-of-age drama is woven through the narrative, and Marcus gets a girlfriend, loses his virginity, goes on the lam, and ultimately takes down the DHS and saves his friend, who has been detained since the beginning of the text. The book ends with Marcus working to protect the rights of Americans, reminding the reader of the need for constant vigilance.

First, I want to be charitable to Doctorow and his work. Little Brother is a work of young adult fiction, and because he is writing for a specific audience, there will be some gloss over many of the finer points of the ideology the book promotes. I don’t know if Doctorow intended the book to be read as a manifesto of sorts, even though it does begin with something akin to one. The book seems more likely to have been intended as edutainment, a thriller with educational information about many different topics relevant to the DIY (do-it-yourself) and hacker communities. However, my charity can only extend so far—at some point, texts are accountable for what is contained in them as objects that do intellectual work in the world. In addition, I think that Doctorow wouldn’t object to my classification of his work as reflective of some of the larger concerns that he writes about in articles on the popular tech blog Boing Boing. In an article about Doctorow for the Financial Times, Tim Harford writes: “In his novels and his blogging, the ruthless abuse of state power is just as much of a theme as the grasping amorality of large corporations.” Doctorow is clearly concerned with the dark and light sides of late capitalism—but Little Brother seems to love the wonderful magical candy palace of the free market a bit too much.

To the text: early in the novel, Marcus is subjected to illegal detention as well as other highly unethical detention practices. He is hit, he is isolated, he is forced to soil himself, he doesn’t get food—there’s nothing here that is defensible from an ethical framework that is interested in the defense of human dignity. Doctorow makes an incredibly nuanced point through the eyes of his young protagonist: “They’d taken everything from me. First my privacy, then my dignity. I’d been ready to sign anything. I would have signed a confession that said I’d assassinated Abraham Lincoln” (25). From a purely practical standpoint, this illustrates a classic argument against torture, that a person will say anything to make it stop. Ethical concerns aside, human beings don’t like to suffer, and have an interest in avoiding it, to lift language from Peter Singer. Then, Doctorow makes a particularly compelling move by turning his young protagonist into a ter-

rorist. He makes a vow: “I’m going to get them,” I whispered, staring at my soda. “I’m going to get them.” (27). The remainder of the novel is Marcus Yallow waging war, getting the DHS. There are some small glimmers of ambiguity, where Marcus wonders if he’s doing the right thing, if he’s endangering his loved ones with his actions, but ultimately, all this worrying serves to create tension within the text, rather than asking serious questions about the consequences of the cyclical nature of the War on Terror. There is a particularly frustrating sequence where Marcus’s friend Jolu wants out of the fight against the DHS, and says to Marcus:

I hate to say it, but you’re white. I’m not. White people get caught with cocaine and do a little rehab time. Brown people get caught with crack and go to prison for twenty years. White people see cops on the street and feel safer. Brown people see cops on the street and wonder if they’re about to get searched. The way the DHS is treating you? The law in this country has always been like that for us (58).

There is some real nuance here, a real question about race politics in the United States, but Marcus glosses over it, thinking that he “didn’t ask to be white,” and that’s really the last we hear of any sort of complexity as far as white privilege goes. The rest of the book is more concerned with the world of pre-DHS (everything is peachy!) and the world of post-DHS (surveillance state!).

This is most evident in the way that the primary antagonists in the text are presented. Early on, Marcus is held at gunpoint by “faceless, eyeless” men in gas masks (17). The theme of uniformed similarity continues describing all of the American uniformed personnel who are square jawed, handsome, and unremarkable (18). The main villain is “severe haircut lady” (21) who doesn’t get a name (Carrie Johnstone) until the very last pages of the book (129). I think it is important to consider what Judith Butler has said on the subject of facelessness:

When we consider the ordinary ways that we think about humanization and dehumanization, we find the assumption that those who gain representation, especially self-representation, have a better chance of being humanized, and those who have no chance to represent themselves run a greater risk of being treated as less than human regarded as less than human, or indeed, not regarded at all (141).

Representation allows for humanization. In situations where individuals do not have any sort of identity, it becomes that much easier to exercise power over them. After watching Standard Operating Procedure, Errol Morris’s documentary about Abu Ghraib prison, it is difficult not to see the face at work in these torturers who are typically represented as faceless. Lynndie England, Javal Davis, Jeremy Sivits, and others are otherwise happy smiling people, who have friends and families, likes and dislikes, interests and hobbies. Once this becomes clear, the line between who has the capacity to become a torturer and who does not is not so clear. In Little Brother, there are good guys and bad guys, people who misuse power and people who use it for the good of mankind, and there is no grey area in between. An easy narrative, one that is very familiar to an American audience. What would this text have looked like if the villains were characters, rather than stock torturer types? In a strange way, being on the receiving end of torture highlights the need for institutions that protect individual rights—but Doctorow’s texts focuses on Marcus’s view of things, a very black and white world. It might be safe to say that the text is showing the perspective of a seventeen-year-old, and leave it at that, but the way that Doctorow’s manifesto
and neoliberal rhetoric sneaks into the text really hamstrings that sort of interpretation.

*Little Brother* is a love-letter to capital, to owning things in the truest sense of the word. Within this context, another binary is set up—complete ownership vs. conditional ownership. Early in the text, Marcus loads an operating system onto his Xbox that allows him to be invisible to anyone who might be attempting to spy on him. He thinks: “The best part of all this is how it made me feel: in control. My technology was working for me, serving me, protecting me. It wasn’t spying on me. This is why I loved technology: if you used it right, it could give you power and privacy” (33). The relationship to things in this text hinges upon a notion about sovereignty over one’s objects, where one has power over life and death in the Foucaultian sense—nobody else gets to make decisions about the things that a person owns.

Not to be obtuse, but this view of ownership is a strange one indeed. Ownership is not simply a binary of owning/not owning. You might own a piece of land, but you do not own the sky above; you might own an ax, but you don’t get to use it to do whatever you want. The rule of law limits ownership. Computers and technology especially complicate this notion, because you cannot own a network, by its very definition. In the anonymous space that Marcus and the thousands of others using hacked Xboxes cohabitate, who owns the messages sent? At what point does a string of numbers switch owners? Is an email that I have sent to another email account no longer mine? I don’t intend to answer any of these questions, because this debate is for an entirely different paper, but my point is that *ownership* in the traditional neoliberal sense is not as clear and easy as Doctorow’s protagonist would like us to think. Just like leaving footprints in a walk through mud, computers leave footprints. Whom does that information belong to? Earlier in this paper, when I spoke about having already arrived in the world that Doctorow fears, I would counter with this—everything leaves data; data is traceable, it can be tracked. We now have the ability to compile and analyze that data. The question of whether or not it should be happening is irrelevant, rather, what we should be asking is about the methodologies of data analysis and the practices that emerge from them; how data is placed next to other data and used to make certain types of conclusions. As Louise Amoore outlines in her work *The Politics of Possibility*, big data is being used to make security decisions, and the methodology is not sound in many instances: “To put the matter simply, it is of lesser consequence whether a risk assessment accurately captures a set of circumstances in the world, than whether the models can be refined for sufficient precision to engage action.” (67). When data is used to fight possibility rather than probability, kids are thrown in prisons for no reason.

*Little Brother* doesn’t think that this is true at all, perhaps most clearly illustrated when Marcus goes “freegan” with another character in the book, Zeb: “Zeb had showed me a secret, something I hadn’t anticipated: there was a whole hidden world out there, a way of getting by without participating in the system” (123). Freegans are dependent upon the waste of others, their relationship is inextricably tied to the system that sustains their lives. To return to Butler: “Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something” (23). While she is speaking about the way that individuals are tied to each other emotionally, societies work the same way as well.

Marcus quotes this line from the Declaration of Independence three times in the text:

> Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to
effect their safety and happiness.\textsuperscript{3}

Government for the people, by the people. It is evident throughout the text that big government has become corrupt and bent upon ruining the lives of the little guy. Once again, this is a deflection, an oversimplification of how the US government has been able to suspend the Bill of Rights and illegally detain and torture individuals considered a national security threat. Timothy Kaufman-Osborne identifies that:

\ldots when the Bush administration has found it politically expedient to secure authorization for executive prerogative in the form of standing law (as opposed to ad hoc authorizations), more often than not, it has sought to evade any significant restrictions on, and hence accountability for, the exercise of that power (11).

It is not “the man” who has done this, faceless individuals like square haircut woman. No—it was individuals who had unchecked power and freedom to exercise it as they saw fit. Presidents and Secretaries of Defense get to make decisions that are unchecked by government writ large. It has been a long slow process, which we are already in the throes of.

Parceled up with the love of the Declaration of Independence is an overstated love of freedom. The word itself appears 46 times in the 140–page text. The book ends with an afterword by Andrew “bunnie” Huang, who is one of the first people to hack the Xbox. He writes:

Little Brother is a reminder that no matter how unpredictable the future may be, we don’t win freedom through security systems, cryptography, interrogations and spot searches. We win freedom by having the courage and the conviction to live every day freely and act as a free society, no matter how great the threats are on the horizon (133).

Returning to earlier in this paper, Doctorow identifies “the right to be left alone.” I think that is what Huang means by freedom here, but I am not sure. The word itself is used so many times in the text that it loses its meaning. What kind of freedom are we talking about here? Negative freedom—the freedom to act without restraints? Or positive freedom, the power and freedom to reach one’s potential? The text is interested more with the former. Within the context of this paper, I view freedom as primitive—it is simply the ability to choose or you do not. Doctorow raises interesting points through some of his characters as they ask the big questions that define the relationship between restrictions of certain freedoms and security. Ultimately, however, he decides upon a definition that is vacuous—freedom means getting to do what you want with the things that you buy as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone else—a decidedly negative sort of freedom.

A point that Doctorow makes that I am in agreement with is his discussion of security. Bruce Schneier, a security technologist, writes the other half of the Afterward. He makes the point that the best security systems are the ones that are open and available to access—the more available something is, the more likely it is that people have tried to break into it. Marcus also goes over this in his narration about how cryptography works: “There’s only one kind of crypto that anyone uses: crypto that’s public, open and can be deployed by anyone. That’s how you know it works” (22).

Doctorow’s other work displays similar levels of activism. Recently, his popular blog Boing Boing started their “Reset the Net” campaign, which is a manifesto and set of downloadable

\textsuperscript{3}This is quoted from \textit{Little Brother}. 
tools that protect the phones and computers of users from surveillance. Looking at articles under the category “Surveillance” also provides plenty of articles about how to protect personal privacy.

I do not think any of these things in isolation are unproductive to the conversation about privacy and security, but Little Brother is one of Doctorow’s most popular works, and is readily available and easily accessible. It reads as a manifesto, one that pits the little guy against the “man,” and I am not entirely comfortable with that notion, as I have shown above. I think that if you’re going to be writing manifestos in the guise of young adult literature, there is a certain responsibility to that audience.

I think openness is the word of the day here, and if I were to rewrite Little Brother, I would be interested in creating a more complex story, where torturers have faces, and there is collateral damage to what Marcus is doing, which would be far more realistic. Just because young adults are reading your book, does not mean that they can’t grapple with a difficult idea or two while they are doing it.

Aristotle writes that “The virtues therefore are engendered in us neither by nature nor yet in violation of nature; nature gives us the capacity to receive them, and this capacity is brought to maturity by habit." As philosophers Rebecca Kukla and Laura Ruetsche more clearly put it: “man is by nature rational. But he is not by original nature virtuous” (392).

What the War on Terror and the consequences have shown is that Americans and the American political system do not possess some sort of inherent moral superiority. People, when left without any sort of accountability, have the potential to commit monstrous acts. The Constitution and the Declaration of Independence are not sacred documents that are beyond consideration for revision and amendment. However, individuals within the United States government made decisions that allowed for events like those at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. These decisions turned people into monsters, which is within everyone’s capacity given the right set of circumstances. That is the ultimate consequence of runaway sovereignty, and we should not forget that just because we have been lucky so far.

**References**


---