

All.Net Analyst Report and Newsletter

Welcome to our Analyst Report and Newsletter

Why we need better reporters to solve our security problems

I don't go to the media when I find out confidential information that I wish the world would understand. Instead, I write articles about the underlying issues we face and how I think they might be reasonably solved. And when the media occasionally seeks to talk to me about such issues, I tell them what I think but nothing specific about clients. That's all part of my job, and I try to do it well.

The job of the media is to seek the truth and tell all of us about it. But the media in the US seems to be so weak at seeking the truth that I am starting to understand why people seek them out to leak secrets. Unless you lead them by the nose to the thing that stinks, they don't seem to have the nose for news that they once did have.

Snowden and surveillance

I use as an example, the Snowden case and government surveillance. I want to start by saying that I have no personal knowledge about this case or these issues at all. All I know is what I observe from media, seen through the lens of my professional experience. Here's what I see... or rather cannot see. I cannot see how reporters seem to miss asking the questions I find so obvious in response to the obfuscations in responses to their prior questions.

Example: Chris Mathews (MSNBC) interviewing President Obama asks about surveillance and the President answers (in effect) that the NSA doesn't spy on US persons. However, the media reported some time earlier that the NSA uses the FBI to do internal surveillance. Then I heard the same meme from the recent 60 minutes (CBS) interview of Gen. Alexander as part of their piece on Snowden. When I heard the same meme again and again under Bush 2, I knew there was a deception underway, and there way. The same standard today says there is still a cover-up going on... Why can't the media see this any better today than when they failed to see it under Bush?

Example: In the same 60 minutes interview, I heard Gen. Alexander tell us that he offered to resign but that his bosses said they didn't think anybody did anything wrong (other than Snowden). But here I have some personal knowledge. I have been asking about how they manage risk aggregation in government systems for many years now. This includes a talk given by Gen. Alexander after which I asked this question as well as a few others. I was quite clear that the things he was saying belied a lack of clarity on the issues, and offered afterward to help them get out of their group think. I was not met with a positive response. So let nobody say that Gen. Alexander suffered from anything less than willful ignorance of the risk aggregation associated with systems administrators. He knew or should have known, at least after seeing the Manning case, that excessive power and access to systems administrators is unnecessary and a bad idea. And yet he failed to adequately act after what many in government called the worst leak in US history (Manning), directly resulting in what is now the even worse, worst leak in US history. So given these obvious facts, how is it we cannot get reporters who will call him (or others) out on their ridiculous claims?

Nothing to see here... move along

I want to note that these are not in any way unusual circumstances. There is a reason we cannot get such reporting out of our reporters. And it is the same reason we cannot solve many of our security problems. As a society, we accept the corruption infesting our system.

We hide behind “better than the alternative”, or “worst system of government except all the others”, but we need not and should not demand less of our reporters just because things could be worse. Things will be worse unless and until we demand that our reporters start to do their jobs.

But let's be honest here, most of us don't want to challenge authority. We believe, or at least tolerate, things we might find to be wrong or bad, as long as they aren't too wrong or bad. And many of us choose not to think about what we ingest from the media, accepting it as scandalous when it is not and as normal when it is unusual.

We have our heroes, which military and political leaders somehow qualify as, even if they seem like cowards in the face of an embarrassing question. They don't like being challenged, especially based on facts or things they don't understand. Rather than admit ignorance and go learn about it, they choose to blame the messenger, return to their comfort zone, and make sure to never encounter that challenging questioner again.

Our reporters know this and, if they want to keep getting the big personalities in the big stories, they have to accommodate the heroes and leaders. Only then, they must tell themselves, will I get to be big enough to tell it like I really see it. And that's the truth of it. Most of the best known and most highly paid reporters don't ask tough questions on big stories. At least not until they build consensus to the point where they are all asking the same questions.

But our security depends upon it!!!

Indeed, our security depends on the ability of the public at large to understand the issues at hand. And that's why we don't have very good security. We know how to oppress people and scare them into or out of behaviors. And we seem to do more and more of that. Cowing people into behaviors that appear to be secure. Like subjecting them to search of person and property at random road stops or allowing the government to seize all of the Internet records but only search them when they deem it appropriate. We see assault weapons bans sought when we all know that it is hand weapons that kill innocent victims for the most part. We see all of this and more in the context of media that seems unwilling or unable to see the obvious inconsistencies, tell us about them, and challenge our leaders until they get answers.

In information protection, we see the same thing again and again. Willful ignorance or a lack of understanding what is in front of our face. One congressman on a news show recently identified the problem with mass surveillance as it exists today. The constitution says, in the 4th amendment:

“The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.”

But we are not secure. Our persons and effects are subject to random stop and search, deemed “reasonable” by the supreme court. Our digital papers and effects are subject to

collection and analysis as they transit the Internet, deemed by the FISA court to be seized but not searched unless and until necessary, except by computerized search of course. Probable cause? No. Guilt by association! An email exchange or cell call links you to a known suspect and you are a suspect. Was a warrant issued? Not for the seizure or the electronic search. Particularly describing the place to be searched and the things to be seized? No, seize it all!

Which of these questions were asked of the President, the General, or others who may actually know the answers? And where is the media in getting to the answers? We hear the questions, but no answers to them. In my view, we need the answers, and the media has to go get them. Our security depends on it.

Who do you believe?

If you believe Snowden, who I do not believe, he claims he's leaking the secrets he stole so the public will know what the government is doing and be able to make informed decisions. But that's the role of the press. And if the press had been doing their jobs, Snowden wouldn't have even this excuse for committing Treason.

If you believe Alexander, who I do not believe when he discusses the limited role of the NSA in domestic surveillance, the NSA knows nothing of the FBI's work and isn't knowingly breaking the law by seizing without warrant or repeatedly exceeding the FISA court warrants, and nobody is knowingly breaking the law by spying on their spouses or love interests using the power of the NSA's surveillance system. And if the press had been doing their jobs, Alexander wouldn't get away with the "nobody knowingly did anything wrong" excuse and his bosses wouldn't treat him as if he did the right thing by failing to fulfill his duty to protect.

If you believe the President, who I do not believe when it comes to the surveillance program, he is just an honest innocent broker for the American people, but he chooses to ignore the role of the FBI in domestic surveillance, always minimizes the surveillance program, and fails to act to mitigate the obvious lack of diligence by firing the generals who fail to act for a period of years to mitigate the Manning vulnerabilities and produces the Snowden consequences. And if the press was doing their job, they would have pressed the issue day after day regarding the Manning vulnerabilities and not accepted the excuses and lame explanations, they would have asked why known problems were allowed to persist for years unattended, and when the Snowden leaks showed up, they would not have accepted security excuses.

Summary

What we have here is a failure to communicate. And I believe that this failure stems from an unwillingness to be plain in what we say and demand answers to questions instead of excuses and obfuscation. And while I understand that reporters are not experts, they should ask experts, test out claims, come prepared to interviews, and not let people in power get away with deceptions unchallenged or unscathed. And if the threat is no more interviews, the response should be the publication of the threat, with all other reporters asking about the threat and asking why the questions the last reporter asked were so threatening to those in power – publicly – and to their face.

Power corrupts, and the light of day purifies. One of the main jobs of the media is to expose those in power to the bright light of day. And that's why we need better reporters to solve our security problems.