CONTEXT, RESEARCH, REFUSAL

PERSPECTIVES ON ABSTRACT PROBLEM-SOLVING

DR SEETA PEÑA GANGADHARAN
Outline

**PART 1**  Context, Context Sensitization

**PART 2**  Refusal: Rectification, Obfuscation, Abolition

**PART 3**  The Problem with Abstraction
Part 1
Context, Context Sensitization
CONTEXT
Not a moment in time...

but a continuation in history.
[I]n studying humans we are examining a creative process whereby people produce and forms of life and society and systems of meaning and value (1989, p. 346).
The Moral Character of Cryptographic Work*

Phillip Rogaway

Department of Computer Science
University of California, Davis, USA

rogaway@cs.ucdavis.edu

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Abstract. Cryptography rearranges power: it configures who can do
what, from what. This makes cryptography an inherently political tool,
and it confers on the field an intrinsically moral dimension. The Snowden
revelations motivate a reassessment of the political and moral positioning
of cryptography. They lead one to ask if our inability to effectively
address mass surveillance constitutes a failure of our field. I believe that
it does. I call for a community-wide effort to develop more effective means
to resist mass surveillance. I plead for a reinvention of our disciplinary
culture to attend not only to puzzles and math, but, also, to the societal
implications of our work.

Keywords: cryptography · ethics · mass surveillance · privacy ·
Snowden · social responsibility

Preamble. Most academic cryptographers seem to think that our field is a fun,
deep, and politically neutral game—a set of puzzles involving communicating
parties and notional adversaries. This vision of who we are animates a field
whose work is intellectually impressive and rapidly produced, but also quite
inbred and divorced from real-world concerns. Is this what cryptography
should be like? Is it how we should expend the bulk of our intellectual capital?

For me, these questions came to a head with the Snowden disclosures of 2013.
If cryptography’s most basic aim is to enable secure communications, how could it
not be a colossal failure of our field when ordinary people lack even a modicum
of communication privacy when interacting electronically? Yet I soon realized
that most cryptographers didn’t see it this way. Most seemed to feel that the
disclosures didn’t even implicate us cryptographers.

I think that they do. So I want to talk about the moral obligations of cryp-
tographers, and my community as a whole. This is not a topic cryptographers
routinely discuss. In this post-Snowden era, I think it needs to be.

* This is an essay written to accompany an invited talk (the 2015 IACR Distinguished
Lecture) given at Asiacrypt 2015 on December 2, 2015, in Auckland, New Zealand.
The essay and talk are addressed to the cryptographic community—my community—and
the words “we” and “our” should be so interpreted. I apologize in advance if I
end anyone with any of my comments; nothing of the sort is my intent.
Part 2
Refusal: Rectification, Obfuscation, Abolition
Our Data Bodies

- Impact of data-driven systems and data collection on marginalized communities
- Community-centered, participatory research in Charlotte, Detroit, & Los Angeles
- 140 interviews + reflective focus groups + participatory workshops
“The grievances were not in the file and I had seven, at least. Good thing I made copies of my own, I took pictures of it. Any time before I turned it in, I took pictures of it so ... I have so much footage that I have to go through...But everything should be in your file grievances and all.”

—Mellow
Then they said, “What's your name?” I go, “Ken Silvio.” “Ken Sylvas?” And I go, “Yeah, Ken Sylvas.” Then he goes, “Well, it's not in the computer.” …Then he said, “It's still not showing.” …they finally go, “Okay, we're going to give you a ticket.”

—Ken
At this juncture in Detroit’s history, there are two clear paths forward. The first path sees more surveillance... The second path is different... It guards privacy while increasing trust in the government. It both protects and serves.

— Detroit Community Technology Project
Part 3
The Problem of Abstraction

Privacy

Health

Collective well-being

Tech welfare
ALIGNMENT

FRICITION
Thank you.

Dr Seeta Peña Gangadharan