

Having the bigger gun: 'House of Cards,' surveillance, and you

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(Author's note: SPOILER ALERT. You've been warned.)

A group of three stands in an empty warehouse. “Tell me why I’m here,” one of the men asks. He is clearly uncomfortable with the situation; it’s late, and this is the kind of place where people disappear. “Domestic surveillance,” the woman fires back. “We need to win an election.”

Privacy pros, I welcome you to "[House of Cards](https://www.netflix.com/title/70178217) (<https://www.netflix.com/title/70178217>)" season four.

House of Cards - Season 4 | Official Trailer [HD] | Netflix



The enormously popular Netflix staple released its newest and most politically provocative installments last month. Since then, viewers have posted up on their respective couches and eschewed social responsibility to follow the show’s morally bankrupt center, Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey, acting god) and his preternaturally unflappable wife, Claire (Robin Wright, girl crush) as they campaign for presidential reelection. Its thirteen episodes are disconcertingly true-to-life, utilizing campaign hooplas, an ISIS-esque terror organization, gun laws, and the thorny issues surrounding — surprise, surprise — surveillance and data mining practices to drive the narrative.

explorations of hacking and cybercrime manifest themselves seismically here.

Yet this season's explicit employment of surveillance and data collection as both a central plot point and a metaphor for probing the amorphous, capricious, and easily-manipulated concepts of fear and truth is what makes it worth putting in the privacy pro's Netflix queue.

Before we dive into specifics, let's consider context. It's 2016 in a fictional U.S., the campaign is in full swing, and incumbent President Underwood, D-S.C., and his coterie of loyal cronies find themselves losing the election to a formidable appointment, the youthfully arrogant Gov. William Conway, R-N.Y. (Joel Kinnaman).

Conway is a particularly jarring foil to Underwood, who is on the receiving end of a host of Nixon comparisons. In this season, the audience finds Underwood white-haired, balding, chubby, and comparatively un-hip. While Conway devotes himself to oversharing with voters via cloying webcasts and social media, Underwood campaigns the old fashioned way, dismissively infantilizing Conway's efforts as too much time spent on the "Twitter."

Not everyone in Underwood's inner circle thinks his patronizing attitude toward Conway's methods is wise, however, especially when it's discovered that Conway and fictional search engine Pollyhop work together to turn user metadata into votes. Political consultant LeAnn Harvey (Neve Campbell), brought on to breathe new life into the campaign, leads the pro-mining charge. She believes that Underwood ought to fight Conway's data with more data. To the chagrin of her peers, she suggests surreptitiously employing the country's foremost data scientist, Aidan MacAllan (Damian Young), who would "do a little research" with the blessing of the NSA. His help would give the Underwood campaign the data they need, while they get to work leaking Conway's Pollyhop machinations.

Underwood, after much hemming and hawing, embraces her idea. Consider this particularly provocative monologue after Underwood decides to move forward with the plan:



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Imagine a duel. Me and Conway. Now, Conway has a powerful gun. A search engine. And it's powerful because with it, he can tell what you think. What you want. Where you are, and who you are. He can turn all those searches into votes. And that's enough bullets to kill my chances of winning. But I have an even bigger gun. It's called the NSA. It's one of the perks of being president. That is, if the courts allow my surveillance request. Imagine the men hanging on these walls. I bet they wish they had a gun like that available to them. Your phone. The phone of the person sitting next to you. Your neighbor's phone, and everyone you know, and the 300 million Americans you don't know. I can see you. And I can use what I see to rig this election. Now, of course, with a weapon like that, well, you can imagine how risky it is. It might have even give pause to an old crook like him [he points to a portrait of Nixon]. I mean, they roasted him on a spit for tapping into a few rooms at the Watergate. I'm talking about tapping into every single home in America, and a weapon like that can blow up in my hands.”

(Episode 7: Chapter 43)

It's a disquieting thought in any universe, but particularly jarring if you're on planet privacy. It makes you want to put down your phone and hide under a rock; one can recognize a lot of truth in his saucy little speech.

Which brings me here. "Does the intercultural film serve as a cultural barometer, giving an essentially accurate reading of the state of inter-relations?" Writer David Budd asks*. "With the appropriate optical-intellectual corrections, I believe it does."

I agree. Consider Frances Ford Coppola's "Dracula," a bloody remake in splashy color released during the height of the AIDS crisis. Or "the villain of vague central-European origin" in the 1941 classic, "The Maltese Falcon," released when America was still smarting from WWI and increasingly apprehensive about its developing sequel. More currently, consider any of the whole host of post-9/11 superhero films, like "Man of Steel" or "The Avengers." Their popularity speaks to society's dual need to both escape from the overwhelmingly troubling events of the day and for someone, somewhere to show up and clean up the mess.

And now, "House of Cards" is offering its commentary on privacy and security, which it places in its pantheon of 2016's most pressing affairs. The show makes a number of interesting points to that end; I've dwelt on three of my takeaways, below.

1. Data is an incredibly valuable tool, or weapon, in the wrong hands.

to the doorstep of a terrorist. It is priceless. "The worth?" scoffs the data scientist, MacAllan, during a discussion on data. "You have no idea." When explaining mining practices to Underwood, MacAllan beautifully expresses their myriad facets by comparing the process to a spoon. "One spoon," he says. "I can use it to stir my coffee. To eat soup. To boil heroin. All they see is the spoon. Not what I do with it."

While Underwood grumpily suggests getting "rid of the spoon" altogether when the particulars confuse him, his "gun" monologue illustrates his deep and abiding understanding of what the process delivers on a macro scale. The spoon is too valuable to just throw away, much like a weapon in battle. To that end, it's deliciously ironic that Underwood compares data and the means he has to obtain it to a gun, as the other half of the season is spent overcoming the effects of gun violence and his administration's subsequent attempts to pass tighter gun control legislation. A weapon in the hands of a "deranged person" is dangerous, Claire Underwood argues again and again as she champions the bill. Dangerous indeed.

The metaphor speaks for itself.

2. Transparency is king, because bulk data collection tends to creep people out.

Underwood's team is convinced that exposing the Conway-Pollyhop allegiance will spook voters and sink his rival. Yet Conway and the CEO of Pollyhop quickly appease public rancor with straightforwardness, meeting up for a joint webcast to explain their partnership in Conway's home. "I'd like to speak to you about those rumors," Conway says. "Because they're not rumors at all. They're facts. 100 percent accurate." He's practically laughing. "Now I realize this might scare a lot of people," he continues. "Do we know your personal information? Can we see what you search for? Are we reading your emails? The answer is no. We're not tracking individuals, we're looking at metadata. Large-scale browsing patterns, search trends, regional portraits."

And then, he spins it.

"A president should know his constituents, and the Internet is the best tool for that. Now, I've met thousands of people, and shaken a lot of hands, but I can't meet everyone. So this is my way of listening to millions of you." He wraps up the webcast by pledging to post the entirety of his phone's contents to his site for mass consumption, a move that charms the public and assuages fears.

The authenticity of his actions is beside the point. What matters is that it's hailed as a wise political step, one that receives widespread acclaim and results in surging polls. The takeaway? Transparency matters. Explaining one's data practices in a friendly, approachable way earns (literal and figurative) points, and people seem to have less apprehension around a gun when they know where the safety is. (Of course, there's that whole [nothing-to-hide argument](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nothing_to_hide_argument) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nothing_to_hide_argument) and how being transparent can be [coerced](https://iapp.org/news/a/circle-makes-us-square/) (<https://iapp.org/news/a/circle-makes-us-square/>), but we'll save that discussion for another time.)

3. What's done in the dark will eventually be broadcast in the light. (See #2)

Black and white. Light and dark. True and false. This show loves duality while illustrating that there really is no such thing. It takes great pains, this season, to indicate that a certain perception — what is curated in the "light" — only exists for so long before deeds done in secret are exposed. "After all," Underwood tells his audience in season one, "we are nothing more or less than what we choose to reveal."

Indeed, to borrow from the late [Alan Westin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_Westin) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_Westin), while privacy may be "the individual's claim to determine what information about himself or herself should be known to others,"** eventually, the curiosity of one's peers will morph into the sort of surveillance and study*** that outs you.

front of a subway train. The fact of the matter is, the show proposes, we're all just data manufacturers, and someone with a press pass or solid grasp of Google analytics can connect the dots or manipulate them to see what they want. Privacy is a temporary and fleeting illusion.

No one ever said this show was an upper.

The issues you face every day, privacy pros, have become important, pertinent, and interesting enough to catch Hollywood's eye in a big way. Surveillance, government use of data, lawful collection, all of it. The series cost an estimated \$100 million to create (http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2015/02/27/netflixs-risky-bet-on-h_n_6766788.html). Producers and studios wouldn't have drained that kind of money into "House of Cards" if they didn't think a considerable amount of the viewers would stay interested in the plot. This season will get privacy laymen thinking about these subjects in a way they weren't before.

Interest often equals impact, and popular media like "House of Cards," with its huge following and its approachable, all-access formatting on Netflix, is enormously influential.

It's worth considering. Or at least worth firing up Netflix to see for yourself. In short: The public is watching. You're living it. You hold a gun — don't misfire.

*David Budd, *Culture Meets Culture in the Movies: An Analysis East, West, North and South, with Filmographies*, 257

**Alan Westin, "Privacy and Freedom," xxxi

***Alan Westin, "Privacy and Freedom," 20

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