

Big Sister is watching: EDVIGE and the angry French

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It was a Frenchman, Michel Foucault, who most famously argued that the etymological link between "states" and "statistics" is no accident—that gathering and organizing information about a population is, in itself, a means of exercising power over it. Some of his countrymen have taken the message to heart: The chorus of critics that has emerged to oppose a massive new "Big Sister" database has just been joined by a prominent member of President Nicolas Sarkozy's own cabinet.

The new database, known as EDVIGE, has sparked a firestorm of opposition from French unions, non-profits, and civil liberties groups since the national privacy watchdog, CNIL, forced the government to make its existence public in July. EDVIGE, which has been dubbed "Big Sister" because the acronym is also a woman's first name, stands for "Exploitation documentaire et valorisation de l'information générale" or "Documentary exploitation and evaluation of general information."

Meant to be used by French intelligence agencies and administrative police, the database would collect personal information about groups or individuals over the age of 13 deemed "likely to breach public order." American history buffs might think of our own Project MINARET or the CIA's Operation CHAOS—two of the secret "watch list" programs that gave rise to the original Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act—or of J. Edgar Hoover's notorious "personal and confidential" files, which archived dish and dirt on public figures. Information could be stored not only on direct targets, but on those who "undertake or have undertaken direct and non-fortuitous relations with them."

A massive petition drive against the program has already garnered nearly 130,000 signatures. But one of the more unlikely names lined up against EDVIGE is that of Hervé Morin, France's secretary of defense. Calling the database a "strange mixing-up of categories," Morin has questioned whether it is "useful to gather data such as telephone numbers, sexual orientation, and details of taxes and assets and the like without knowing exactly what the point is."

French Interior Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie, who oversees the EDVIGE program, shot back that she would have put Morin's mind at ease, if only he had "found my phone number." French officials more generally have sought to portray the new system as little more than an upgrade of preexisting databases. The rather low age barrier for inclusion has been cast as a response to growing juvenile delinquency and gang activity

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