A TANGLED WEB

Four Canadians talk with CJFE about defending digital rights

FROM PRIVACY to surveillance, censorship to hacking, there are a number of ways that the use and governance of technologies can impact our digital activities. Around the world, people are working to defend digital rights. The four Canadians featured here are working on important projects related to the right to free expression online, and also raising public awareness about this critical issue. CJFE talked to them about their projects, whom they're watching and what issues they think should be on your radar in the coming year.

GABRIELLA COLEMAN

Wolfe Chair in Scientific and Technological Literacy in the Art History and Communication Studies Department at McGill University, and author of Coding Freedom: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Hacking

CJFE: What are your main areas of interest?

GABRIELLA COLEMAN: I am primarily focused on computer hackers of all sorts. Last fall I taught a class in computer hacking, and I am very interested in the issue quite broadly. One of my most recent interests is the issue of scientists being silenced, unable to talk about their research. And I am also quite interested in the overlap between copyright and free expression, and the issue of surveillance—more specifically, governments hiring firms to do surveillance or propaganda work for them. This last one has been reported on a bit more recently, but I believe is still quite under-covered.

CJFE: What are you currently working on?

GC: I'm currently writing a book on Anonymous. The book will give a sense of where they came from, how they work and what is so interesting about them. I am hoping that it will be out by the end of the year, or very early in 2014.

CJFE: While we're waiting for your book, what are some other great reads you could recommend?

GC: *Hacking the Future: Privacy, Identity, and Anonymity on the Web* by Cole Stryker, and *This Machine Kills Secrets: How WikiLeakers, Cypherpunks, and Hacktivists Aim to Free the World's Information* by Andy Greenberg.

CJFE: What are the most important issues or obstacles related to free expression in the digital realm, either in Canada or globally?

GC: A strong desire by the copyright industry to take websites down, or punish individuals for piracy. This is a big issue that could really impact nations and the international sphere.

Using copyright as a penalty isn't new—there is a strong history of this, and an incredible amount of resources copyright industries have put into doing this for more than 25 years. This is particularly of concern in the U.S., where they have international agreements pushing for these laws that impinge on free speech.

The second issue is the surveillance of individuals online. It's important to be thinking about how to make sure people are aware of the issues when they have minimal knowledge of basic technologies, layered with how can we provide encryption tools for security and privacy, with better usability (these tools are difficult to use), to journalists and activists. It's incredibly important, and also very difficult.

Finally, the capabilities to track and gather information, and then sift through it, are astronomical. Particularly what they can do with all of this information once they have used technology to process it.

CJFE: Who else's work should we follow?

GC: Christopher Prince, strategic policy analyst at the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, and Chris Soghoian, principal technologist and senior policy analyst at the American Civil Liberties Union.

Interviews have been edited for length.