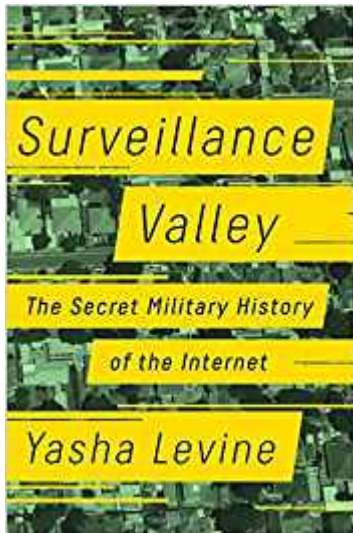


Edinburgh International Book Festival 2019: Yasha Levine

Are you reading this on your phone? Did you click through to the article via a social media platform? Can you imagine life for even an hour or two without the internet?

But did you ever stop to wonder where this magical network, which invades, shapes and fuels our lives on a second-by-second basis, actually came from? San Francisco-based investigative journalist, Yasha Levine, has the answers. He has written a book, *Surveillance Valley, The Secret Military History of the Internet*, which traces the internet back to its secretive origins as a tool of the US military when it sought to outwit the Vietnamese. In the book, Levine shows that spying wasn't just a by-product of the digital age, it was woven into its very fabric.

Whichever way you look at it, the internet has become essential to our lives and for most people, expunging it from their world is not an option. But if there's anything I took away from Levine's Edinburgh Book Festival event, it's to bear in mind that these social media companies and search engines with whom you entrust your most private data exist for one reason only – to make money. And they are largely self-regulating, to boot. You don't have to be a mathematician to realise that equation isn't going to end well.



And that's where people like Levine and organisations like the Edinburgh International Book Festival come in. We need investigative journalists more than ever in this era of disinformation, manipulation and greed, and we need platforms for them to shout from. Journalism can hold individuals and institutions accountable in the way that members of the public or regulatory organisations simply cannot.

The internet is here to stay, but it would certainly pay to be a bit more aware of just exactly what feeds the beast that we have all welcomed into our homes and lives, and to consider on occasion whether it really has our best interests at heart.