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A Digital Bill of Rights

By Matthew Taylor and Nick Hopkins
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More than 500 of the world's leading authors, including five Nobel prize winners, have condemned the scale of state surveillance revealed by the whistleblower Edward Snowden and warned that spy agencies are undermining democracy and must be curbed by a new international charter.

The signatories, who come from 81 different countries and include Margaret Atwood, Don DeLillo, Orhan Pamuk, Günter Grass and Arundhati Roy, say the capacity of intelligence agencies to spy on millions of people's digital communications is turning everyone into potential suspects, with worrying implications for the way societies work.

They have urged the United Nations to create an international bill of digital rights that would enshrine the protection of civil rights in the internet age.

Their call comes a day after the heads of the world's leading technology companies demanded sweeping changes to surveillance laws to help preserve the public's trust in the internet – reflecting the growing global momentum for a proper review of mass snooping capabilities in countries such as the US and UK, which have been the pioneers in the field.

The open letter to the US president, Barack Obama, from firms including Apple, Google, Microsoft and Facebook, will be followed by the petition, which has drawn together a remarkable list of the world's most respected and widely-read authors, who have accused states of systematically abusing their powers by conducting intrusive mass surveillance.

Tuesday's statement says the extent of surveillance revealed by Snowden has challenged and undermined the right of all humans to "remain unobserved and unmolested" in their thoughts, personal environments and communications. "This fundamental human right has been rendered null and void through abuse of technological developments by states and corporations for mass surveillance purposes," the statement adds.

"A person under surveillance is no longer free; a society under surveillance is no longer a democracy. To maintain any validity, our democratic rights must apply in virtual as in real space."

Demanding the right "for all people to determine to what extent their personal data may be legally collected, stored and processed", the writers call for a digital rights convention that states will sign up to and adhere to. "Surveillance is theft. This data is not public property, it belongs to us. When it is used to predict our behaviour, we are robbed of something else – the principle of free will crucial to democratic liberty."

McEwan told the Guardian: "Where Leviathan can, it will. The state, by its nature, always prefers security to liberty. Lately, technology has offered it means it can't resist, means of mass surveillance that Orwell would have been amazed by. The process is inexorable – unless it's resisted. Obviously, we need protection from terrorism, but not at any cost."

Civil liberties groups have criticised the UK government for putting intense political pressure on the Guardian and other media groups covering the leaks rather than addressing the implications of the mass surveillance programmes that have been uncovered. But campaigners hope Tuesday's statement will increase the pressure on governments to address the implications of the Snowden revelations.

"International moral pressure is what's needed to ensure politicians address the mass invasion of our privacy by the intelligence services in the UK and US," said Jo Glanville, from English Pen, which along with its sister organisations around the world has supported the Writers Against Mass Surveillance campaign. "The signatories to the appeal are a measure of the level of outrage and concern."

Tuesday's statement is being launched simultaneously in 27 countries, and organisers hope members of the public will now sign up through the change.org website. One of the authors who helped set up the campaign, Juli Zeh, said writers around the world had felt compelled to act: "We all have to stand up now, and we as writers do what we can do best: use the written word to intervene publicly."

Another author told the Guardian she regarded Snowden as a "brave and selfless human being". "We should be supporting him in trying to determine the extent of the state in our lives. We have had no debate, no vote, no say, and hardly any information about how our data is used and for what purpose. Our mobile phones have become tracking devices. Social networking is data profiling. We can't shop, spend, browse, email, without being monitored. We might as well be tagged prisoners. Privacy is an illusion. Do you mind about that? I do."