



Privacy and Health Concerns on “Smart Meters” Growing Globally

As the international effort to deploy so-called “smart meters” to monitor electricity usage marches on, resistance to the controversial devices is increasing around the world as well. Proponents argue that the scheme could save money and reduce energy use. Opponents from across the political spectrum, however, worry that the smart meters might not be just a stupid idea and a waste of money — they could actually be dangerous in more ways than one.



Critics of the technology cite, among an array of concerns, the potentially vast surveillance capabilities of the new electric meters, which allow governments and other entities to gather detailed personal information on a previously unimaginable scale. Possible health risks, threats to privacy from hackers, higher costs for customers, efforts to reduce electricity usage and impose changes in energy-use patterns, and many other problems are also contributing to the growing tide of opposition.

Smart meters are ostensibly designed to monitor electricity use in far greater detail than traditional electric meters, all while giving energy suppliers faster and easier access to the data. The devices also wirelessly transmit the information collected to a central location and can even communicate with newer household appliances. A range of other advanced functions that older metering technology did not provide — some yet to be developed or even imagined — are also cited by critics and advocates alike.

One of the key selling points for the devices, which are also being used to meter natural gas and water, is that they allow utility operators to revamp their pricing structures. Utility monopolies could, for example, decide to charge more for electricity during high consumption periods while reducing prices during low usage hours. If it was a free market, most liberty-minded Americans probably would not mind that. But of course, there is more.

Another supposed benefit, for power companies at least, is the ability to monitor and control electricity delivery without physically visiting the customer’s property. Power or even water can be turned off remotely, making it much easier for suppliers to cut off service even over matters that previously would not have been worth sending out an employee to physically flip the switch.

Despite immense pressure from special interests, lobbyists, and government-controlled utility providers, however, public support for smart meters is virtually non-existent. Even some high-level officials, including the attorney general of Connecticut and lawmakers throughout the nation, have balked at paying in some cases billions of dollars for a program that offers few benefits, if any, to the consumers who are being forced to pay for it.

Still, from Europe to Japan and Australia to Canada, the expansion of smart meters is already well underway. In the United States, funded partly by the so-called “stimulus” package, the controversial devices are also spreading quickly, costing billions of dollars already. Some jurisdictions have



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essentially made the new meters mandatory, while policy makers in a few areas have passed legislation banning them.

The myriad downsides and the dubious benefits have attracted fierce criticism and more than a few [protests](#) by outraged consumers. From Texas to California to Maine and even [Canada](#), citizens have been resisting the scheme to install smart meters on their property — sometimes successfully, in other cases meeting with failure.

Opposition to smart meters actually made national headlines last month after a Texas woman [pulled a gun on a man attempting to install one of the devices](#) at her home. “My main concern originally was the privacy — as far as I’m concerned this is a surveillance device,” Houston-area activist leader Thelma Taormina told *The New American* after the incident. But in addition to the potential violation of the Fourth Amendment, Taormina and other smart-meter resisters have many other concerns.

At the top of smart-meter opponents’ lists is the systematic violation of personal privacy by authorities, Big Business, or any individual who knows how to access the wireless data being transmitted by the devices. Surprisingly, however, it is not just citizens and activists who have spoken out about the problem. In June, the European Data Protection Supervisor (EDPS), an official EU body, expressed serious concerns as well.

“The Europe-wide rollout of ‘smart metering systems’ enables massive collection of personal information from European households, thus far unprecedented in the energy sector,” the EDPS said in a [report](#), calling the new system “a radical change” compared to past information gathering. “The potential intrusiveness of collection is increased by the fact that data are collected, which may infer information about domestic activities: data may track what members of a household do within the privacy of their own homes.”

According to the report, smart meters will allow the collection of detailed data regarding energy consumption “down to the hour, quarter of an hour, and more.” The mass amount of detailed information, it said, means that anyone with access to the data will be able to “know when each individual appliance in a household is turned on and off, and can often also identify what specific appliances are used.”

The system could be a potential goldmine for non-governmental criminals, too — letting them determine, for example, exactly when a house is unoccupied. “This raises concerns with regard to security, the rights to privacy and the protection of personal data,” the report said. “The risks to data protection, however, go further than these most immediate concerns.”

Even more alarming for privacy advocates, the report continues by noting that “deployment of smart metering may lead to tracking the everyday lives of people in their own homes and building detailed profiles of all individuals based on their domestic activities.” On top of that, the EDPS explained, smart meters can even collect data from RFID tags, the electronic chips that are becoming increasingly ubiquitous worldwide.

“Further, law enforcement agencies, tax authorities, insurance companies, landlords, employers, and other third parties may also be interested in personal energy usage information,” the EU report continued. In its concluding remarks, the EDPS noted that the mass adoption of the smart meters entails “considerable risks” and enables “massive collection of personal data from European households and may lead to tracking what members of a household do within the privacy of their own homes.”

Also a concern of many smart meter opponents is the scheme’s links to broader international efforts to



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achieve what the United Nations calls “[sustainable development](#).” In essence, the UN, through [Agenda 21](#) and other deeply controversial mechanisms, wants to reduce consumption of everything — electricity and power in particular.

Because smart meters have so many potential applications and functions, critics worry that the devices will be used first to change energy-use patterns — trying to decrease usage during certain time periods, for example. Eventually, many opponents believe the devices will be used to gradually reduce power consumption regardless of what consumers think about it, or even what they need.

Indeed, countless activists across the United States have already highlighted the link between smart meters and broader UN-backed goals of decreasing consumption. “Smart meters or energy audits affect everyone in town,” observed American Policy Center chief Tom DeWeese, a long-time foe of the UN and its controversial “sustainability” agenda. “What is the problem? Government is dictating your energy use that you are paying for.”

Then there are health concerns, especially surrounding the emission of pulsed radio-frequency (RF) radiation by the devices. Some activists [say](#) they suffered adverse effects when a smart meter was installed at their home. And despite the complaints largely being dismissed by proponents of the new system or the special interests profiting from it, even the American Academy of Environmental Medicine has called for caution in rolling out smart meters while further studies and investigations are conducted on the potentially harmful effects.

“Multiple studies correlate RF exposure with diseases such as cancer, neurological disease, reproductive disorders, immune dysfunction, and electromagnetic hypersensitivity,” the academy [says](#) on its website about the radiation emitted by smart meters and other devices that use similar technology. “Genotoxic effects from RF exposure, including studies of non-thermal levels of exposure, consistently and specifically show chromosomal instability, altered gene expression, gene mutations, DNA fragmentation and DNA structural breaks.”

As the controversial devices continued to be rolled out across the Western world and eventually much of the planet, many opponents and activists say they would be satisfied with an “opt out” allowing them to keep their old meters if they specifically chose to do so. Other critics and skeptics, however, [want](#) the smart-meter roll out to be based on an opt-in system, if not scrapped altogether.

Officials have gradually started to acknowledge the concerns, and in many states, caution is being exercised, if only for political reasons. In areas where smart meters have already been adopted, opposition is still growing, and it is likely that authorities will eventually be forced to allow citizens to demand removal of the devices from their homes. In the meantime, however, the battle will continue to rage as authorities build their so-called “[smart grid](#).”

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