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Smart Meters Raise Privacy Outcry

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White. Affluent. Educated. Liberal. That pretty much sums up [Fairfax, Calif.](#), a 7,500-person burb a dropkick distant from San Francisco, tucked in Marin County -- satirized for its surfeit of Birkenstocks and tofu in the novel [The Serial](#) over 30 years ago.

So tell me this: Why is a place stuffed with Priuses and solar panels adamantly [opposed](#) to smart electric meters? Moreover, why should you care?

A reality: There is no smart electric grid without smart meters, which to count as “smart,” must offer a real-time data flow about monitored resource consumption. (For example, the meter can tell the utility that you’re showering right now.) Ideally, the meter also will facilitate a two-way communication with the utility that enables it to offer customers appropriate real-time tips and pointers about how best to economize on energy consumption.

“To have an effective energy policy there has to be communication among the parties -- utilities, consumers -- and it all starts with a smart meter,” says John Maisel, publisher of [Electrical Contractor](#), a trade magazine that has frequently covered the smart meter issue.

Appliances, Maisel points out, have gotten loads more intelligent and energy-efficient, but it will take smart metering to bring it all together. A reason is that a chief driver in utility cost is anticipating peak demand. If peaks could be manipulated by shifting usage -- say, by, encouraging users to wash dishes and clothes at 3:00 a.m., not 6:00 p.m. -- that just might let utilities build fewer peak-load generating stations, which would lower costs.

What is not to like?

Lots, it turns out; and the suburbanites in Fairfax are not alone in voicing opposition.

“Smart meters won’t bring the desired results without substantial behavior modification on the part of consumers,” says [Roland Hall](#), a partner at Atlanta-based law firm Autry, Horton & Cole. In a world of smart meters, for the utility to know you are using a dishwasher at 6:00 p.m. is only

a first step. The next step -- the behavior mod -- is actually shifting that chore to an off-peak hour.

And that is just the start of the grumbles about smart meters.

Privacy, said Hall, is another real concern.

He's not the only one who thinks so. In Vermont, where utilities say they plan to roll out smart meters in 2012, a group called [StopMeters](#) has mounted a campaign to derail this effort, and a prime plank is its worries about privacy because, [says](#) StopMeters, utilities have no expertise in safeguarding personal information.

Indeed, suggest some anti-smart-meter agitators, utilities in fact want to *sell* users' personal information. Still others say utility usage will be of high interest to law enforcement -- which already [uses](#) electricity records to hunt for indoor marijuana growers.

Similar concerns have effectively blocked rollout of smart meters in the [Netherlands](#); and privacy focused groups in the United Kingdom increasingly believe they can stop smart meters in [England](#).

But here is the reality: Without smart metering, there cannot be smarter energy use; and that means there either will be higher energy bills or more and dirtier fuels (more coal, for instance), because there just has been no magic bullet on the supply side of energy. Cutting usage is the only real option, and, without smart meters, there is not much reason for optimism that consumption will be cut.

But just how much energy will smart meters save? The UK government looks to install 53 million smart meters in 30 million homes and businesses by 2019 -- and come 2020 it says households will annually save about [£23 \(US\\$36\)](#) apiece.

Is that a fair price for loss of your privacy? Thirty-six bucks?

Just maybe the citizens in Fairfax, Calif., and in Vermont have a point.

— Robert McGarvey *has been online and writing about the Internet for nearly 25 years.*