

Your privacy, their profits [Commentary]

By **Joseph Ganem**

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In the switch to "smart meters," BGE is inconveniencing its customers for something they probably don't even want and is somewhat suspect, anyway: Just imagine the information BGE will be able to glean from real-time utility usage data available with smart meters. It will likely be possible for the company to not only deduce the number of people living in your house, but also when they go to work, return home, eat, watch TV, go to bed and so on, because all of these activities involve turning on and off appliances of various kinds and using more or less electricity.

And while BGE says on its website that it "does not now and does not plan to sell customers' information," it is naïve to think the utility won't reconsider in the future. The data set generated by smart meters is likely to become valuable property for which various business and government entities that desire real-time information on people's daily activities would pay handsomely.

BGE long ago stopped sending meter readers into people's homes — even earlier at my house. After many months had elapsed I called to ask why. I was told that there was a notation on our account that we had a "vicious dog." To those who knew our dog — she is deceased now — this label is laugh-out-loud funny. But, to resolve the standoff over the dog, BGE agreed at their expense to install a meter that transmitted our gas usage wirelessly to a passing meter-reading vehicle. Now most inaccessible meters send information this way.

So when BGE contacted us about installing a smart meter, I told them that it was unnecessary. But they insisted on needing the real-time information, and at the same time would not make an appointment for the installation. Instead BGE required that I be home for a four-hour time window because their installers refuse to adhere to a schedule, and they needed access to the inside of our home, where the gas meter is kept.

I reluctantly agreed to stay home from work for half a day so that BGE could install the meter. But on that day it snowed, and BGE called off the installation citing safety concerns for their workers. A second appointment was scheduled, and again I stayed home for half a day. BGE did not show up. When I called to ask why, I was told that I had heard the date wrong. A third appointment was scheduled. This time BGE showed up, but no installation took place. The smart meter would not fit because the foundation of our house is in the way.

A week later we received a letter from BGE stating that we would be charged monthly fees if we did not allow a smart meter installation. I called to remind them that installers had come and were not able to perform the work. I was told that BGE would contact us in the future when a meter to fit our house became available. We never heard from them again. I don't know if we will be hit with the fees next month for not having a smart meter.

I am fortunate because I work a salaried professional job, and I am not struggling to pay the bills each month. Repeatedly staying home for half-a-day to deal with this nonsense did not impact me financially. I can even afford the surcharges that BGE will impose if it is never able to install a smart meter, and the extra charges might even be worth it for the privacy.

For many people in Baltimore, where meters are more likely to be inside older homes, a half-day spent at home waiting for installers is a half day of lost pay, or maybe even a lost job if their bosses require them to be at work

every day. In the August 10 Baltimore Sun, a BGE spokesman said "Customers just have busy lives and getting a meter installed ... is not their top priority." I would agree. "Busy lives" means struggling to make a living and taking care of their families.

BGE is inconveniencing and possibly imposing financial hardship on people in order to collect highly personal data that it can potentially sell for profit. Then BGE has the audacity to complain that submitting to its intrusions is not a priority for many people.

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