California's Latest Revolt: Against Smart Electric Meters

By ALEX SALKEVER Posted 9:00 AM 07/19/10 Energy, Technology, Economy, General Electric, Green, Cisco Systems
Comments: 54

Sometime in April, Pacific Gas & Electric (PCG) put a brand new "smart meter" on the home I rent in Marin County, Calif. We were never notified or asked if we wanted one. The installer just came one day while we were out, and it was a done deal. As a confirmed environmentalist, I thought this should have been a good thing. Smart meters will, in theory, play a key role in managing energy consumption by households like mine.

The devices are wireless, so they eliminate the need for meter readers and save companies like PG&E money while reducing the carbon footprint and pollution resulting from running fleets of trucks to tally power usage at millions of homes. Smart meters also can show a homeowner patterns about energy usage and even notify them about energy usage anomalies or spikes in power demand.

Smart meters will ultimately allow for more dynamic pricing in electrical power and for communities like Southern Marin, where I live, to make a choice to reduce power on days when the grid is near capacity due to a heat wave, while it remains reliably cool in my neck of the woods.

Dangerous Side Effects?

All of these goals seem laudable and logical. Yet there is a brewing smart meter revolt across the Golden State. Last week, the Marin Realtors Association called for a halt to all new smart meter installations in Marin County. Their rationale? They feared the smart meters would increase the levels of electromagnetic radiation around homes. This would give buyers pause and reduce real estate values in the already depressed (by historical standards) market. The former hippie enclave of Fairfax, located in Marin, has passed an ordinance to ban smart meters.

This revolt, however, is hardly the exclusive province of the NPR set or the real-estate mafia. In several counties in the politically conservative Central Valley, thousands of homeowners have claimed that the new smart meters caused rapid spikes in their electrical bills, even though their power consumption remained relatively constant. (The utilities blamed those spikes on fast increases in the cost of power during particularly toasty periods.)

Other homeowners have said they don't want another source of radiation (meaning, radio waves) near their homes, considering the steady increase of all manner of electromagnetic-emitting devices from WiFi routers to cordless phones to garage-door openers. These are often the same homeowners who react suspiciously to new cell phone towers in their neighborhoods, a topic that has become increasingly contentious. Even though engineers generally say there's no risk, at least a handful of influential doctors have chosen to reserve judgment on the topic.

Privacy Invasion?

Running underneath many of the objections is uneasiness with the "Big Brother" aspect of smart meters. Do we really want the utility company to know when we're home, when we're washing or drying our clothes, whether we're taking too many showers (or not) or probing for other "energy saving" insights that could eventually come from smart meter technology as it heads toward a logical conclusion of monitoring every electrical outlet in a home?

This has resulted in some surprisingly strong reactions from homeowners. Some have put locks over their electrical meters to prevent the switch. Others
call the smart meter push an invasion of privacy and "Un-American."

The California Smart Meter Revolt hasn't slowed the rapid development of smart-meter technology, with dozens of companies bringing to market smart-meter systems that provide more granular detail and instant-message reminders, or consoles showing real-time energy usage to homeowners. Those include stock market titans such as General Electric (GE) and Cisco Systems (CSCO).

But Next Time, Please Ask

Smart meters will eventually prevail. But visceral reaction against these gadgets, particularly by the Prius-driving, tree-hugging set of Southern Marin County — arguably one of the more liberal parts of California, if not the country — certainly hints at the high barriers smart meter makers face in gaining acceptance and overcoming a wall of suspicion and fears of invasions of privacy.

As for me, I didn't make much of a stink about the new meter. These things are, after all, good for the environment. Glitches are to be expected. I realize most of my privacy is already gone. But anytime a big company comes and installs a wireless device that measures what's going on inside my home without notifying me or explaining what is happening, that's a different issue. And in this case it's enough to make me want to tear the thing out and toss it on the trash heap.

Tagged: carbon footprint, electric grid, electromagnetic radiation, environment, environmentalism, environmentally friendly, Pacific Gas Electric, PGE, power consumption, privacy, privacy issues, smart meters

Alex Salkever

View all Articles »
Senior Technology Writer

Alex Salkever is a columnist for DailyFinance, covering Silicon Valley from his perspective as an executive at a clean-tech start-up. He formerly worked as a senior research director at DeMatteo Monness where he oversaw technology coverage and hybrid research for the firm's hedge fund and mutual fund clients. Prior to that, Salkever was the technology editor for BusinessWeek.com. He was also the site's Apple columnist. He is based in San Francisco.

Read More
SUBSCRIBE TO:
RSS

MONEY CLIPS

THRIVING: Extreme Savers Share Their Secrets - CNNMoney
CONTROVERSIAL: Taxing Sodas for a Healthier Economy? - TIME.com
NANTUCKET: Foreclosures in Paradise - FORTUNE
SCHOOL'S OUT: The Least Educated Cities in America - Huffington Post
SOCIAL SECURITY: Worried You'll Outlive Your Savings? - SmartMoney
PLEASANT SURPRISES: Things Looking Up for U.S. Airlines - CNBC
HOLD ON TIGHT: America's Fastest Roads - Forbes

COMMENTS (54)
Page 1 of 6 1 2 3 4 5 6 Next >>
Sort By Newest First

Threaded
Highest Rated
Oldest First
Newest First

Fixeman
7:49PM Jul 19 2010
these are known as vampire meters here, if you can read it from city hall, it can be manipulated from there also

I heard they are really just some new spy technology that they are trying out!

I live in California. When my so called smart meter was installed, my PG&E bill went up over $200 dollars. The same thing happened to a number of people I know. I called PG&E to complain and they were very blunt saying that it is working fine and rushed me off the phone. The next month after I called them it went back down to normal. Now they are finally starting to admit that they "may" have "some" smart meters that are malfunctioning. Yeah, no $@%#!?! Some one needs to look into these crooked $@%# and start getting our money back. The problem is government and politicians are in their back pocket.
Who are you? For once a person that knows what they are talking about. Bottom line is a increase in electric use to you, the customer. Air condition at midnight, shower at 4 AM, thats customer savings!

Chuck

that's got the be dumbest, most naive, uninformed, stupid opinion I've seen on the net

Reply Rate This Comment

This is all just the beginning of the ultimate enslavement of the American people by the folks disguising themselves as progressives. These sheeple types enjoy the feel of the collective yoke and unjustifiably want the rest of the public to experience that same feeling of being controlled, too. These meters will one day be used to ration the use of electrical power that you use each day. Kinda fits in well with the "lets all buy more efficient appliances and tv sets", doesn't it? The modern pc youth culture (in my opinion the most diabolical brainwashing success used on such a wide group of people in this countries history) has also spawned the unquenchable perceived need for more and more intrusion into everyday life by the government (the use of Facebook and gps equipped mobile devices being prime examples). In my opinion, w have got to start to realize that this is just the path that has been cynically devised by the powers that be to ultimately assert total control on the peoples daily lives by identifying the remaining cross section of individualist non compliers outy there, the ones that used to make up the majority of this once proud land, and then phoneying up laws and new regulations designed to make them guilty of failure to comply and thus give legal cover for law enforcement types to take them to court and force them to bend to the governments will. Years ago the isolationists predicted a set of ************* (when communists where still the bogueynan) could be devised that would set this exact political situation into motion. The books 1984 and Animal Farm seem quite relevant in todays America where the laws are ignored along with the will of the people by the governing class in Washington DC. They always seek to frame this total disdain in the "its in your best interests" dialouge. which our complicit and compliant media outlets respew each evening on their propaganda programs formally known as the news hour. Two years ago the liberal left propaganda against GW Bush was routinely using the provisions within the Patriot Act as an example of right wing control, yet in basically 19 months of dictatorial control over the federal governent, what was considerd extreme encroachment on american civil liberties, has been dwarfed by the policies the Democrats have designed and passed into law. The act of purchasing insurance coverage is no longer an option to decide about, it is now a govt. mandate. The IRS can now legally peruse your banking statements to make sure you are fully in compliance with these new rules of the land. That these bills weren't even bothered to be read or the policy details even worked out in a minimalist fashion of detail before they were voted on and the signed into law is the most disturbing aspect of this whole power grab. November's elections are the only chance left for the average people to retake control of their ************* unfortunately just that simple folks. We have to wrestle back the control these neophytes have determined themselves in control over. The author of this fluff piece seems incapable of understanding the slippery slope his sheep like acceptance of these intrusions sets the country on a path down. His attitudes are the biggest problem we all have to surmount.

Reply Rate This Comment
MARGIESMEMORIES
6:19PM Jul 19 2010
Well Alex these Smart Meters have been advertised on television and inserts in your PG&E bill. So nobody has snuck up on you. Bill inserts have mentioned these meters for months and also on the internet.

FroboseTF
5:48PM Jul 19 2010
SnowMassey
The un-Americans that do drugs are the problem...Talk radio scares no one. It is the lies they tell every day that scares me.

I agree with you about the people who use drugs. But that won't change because they are arresting the wrong people.

If you think Talk Radio is spreading lies call, and confront them with facts, and logical reasoning derived from those facts.

B.S. cannot stand up to the cold hard light of facts. So I will repeat my challenge. If you think you have a good reasoned argument that is backed by fact have some guts, and call his radio show, and make a fool of him. In public. Show the world just how stupid his arguments are. Stop complaining about him, and DO something about him. You have as much right as anyone else to call his show, and expose his lies, and faulty logic to the world. If you can.

GOT SOMETHING TO SAY?
YOU'LL BE ASKED TO REGISTER OR SIGN IN BEFORE POSTING A COMMENT.

DailyFinance Wire
- Smart Grids: Good for the Country, Good for Investors
- Intel May Have a New Deal With the FTC
- Gilead Drug Used in a Vaginal Gel Cuts Women's AIDS Risk
- Texas Instruments Earnings Soar on Tablet Strength
- E-book Sales Surpass Hardcovers at Amazon
- IBM Earnings Leave Investors Feeling Blue
- Jennifer Convertibles Files for Chapter 11 Bankruptcy
Homebuilders losing confidence in the recovery
Market changes, investors drive Motorola's breakup
Feds: Oil, gas leaking from cap on ruptured well
Nokia Siemens to buy Motorola wireless gear unit
Court grants bail to jailed ex-media mogul Black
Stocks zing zagger as investor optimism waxes and wanes
IBM lifts 2010 forecast but economic worries loom
Halliburton 2Q profit jumps 83 percent

Follow Our Writers

PALLAVI GOGOI  Financial Writer
PETER COHAN  Financial Columnist
SARAH GILBERT  Features Writer
GENE MARCIAL  Financial Columnist
JEFF BERCOWITZ  Media Columnist
JAMES ALTUCHER  Financial Columnist
MERCEDES M. CARDONA  Retail Reporter
NIKHIL HUTHEESING  Assistant Managing Editor
• Bank of America's dark cloud
• Wall Street: Bring on the profit reports
• IBM profit jumps, but sales fall short

More CNNMoney.com
• Nokia Siemens buys Motorola infrastructure unit
• Fund bears lead the pack in volatile markets
• Halliburton hit by oil crackdown

More Financial Times

More from CNBC.com
• Earnings Roundup: July 19
• A Conversation with Gulf Oil CEO Joe Petrowski
• Pops & Drops: H&R Block, Apollo...

More at SmartMoney
• Crown Holdings 2Q Revenue Misses Street
• Noble Corp. Posts 2Q Miss
• Zions 2Q Results Disappoint

More Fox Business
• Apple discussed Verizon switch 'at least half a...
• Kindle's digital book sales overtake hardcover...
• Rock Band 3 crashing into living rooms on...

More from Engadget
• US Companies Rethink China Ambitions
• Conrad Black Granted Bail: Ex-Media...
• Hugh Hendry, Hedge Fund Manager:...

More from Huffington Post
• Unemployment benefits back on the...
• Safety alert: Child deaths from heat...
• New law targets latest health menace...

More WalletPop
• Borrowing from Friends and Family: 5...
• Curves Falls Flat, Closes More Fitness...
• Why Didn't I Think of That? Surf-Grip...

More from AOL Small Business
• RSVIP: Schmuck-Free Dinner for "Dinner for...
• Incredible Louwman Auto Museum Now Open in The...
• Valentino Shining Roses Tote, Handbag of the Day

More at Luxist.com
• Michigan Foreclosure Aid Program...
• Marilyn Died Here: $3.6 Million...
• Make Facebook Your Friend When Buying...

More from Housing Watch
• Family Finds Body of Missing Mother
• Scores Killed in Indian Train Crash
• Abortion Rights Advocates Decry Deery Health

More from AOL News

Search DailyFinance News

Business News
• Main
• Stock Market News
• Investing
• Portfolios
• BloggingStocks
• About Us
• Economy
• DailyFinance RSS Feeds
• Press Releases
• Small Business
• Start a Business
• Business Marketing
• Business Financing

What's Hot
• Google Nexus One
• Facebook 500 Million
• California Smart Meters
• PepsiCo Earnings
• KFC Oprah Coupon
• Georgia Tax Free Holiday
• Feline's Pride Recall
• McDonald's Smoothies
• Dita von Teese Perrier
• HP Well Seepage
• Atlas Shrugged Movie
• Neverland Ranch Park

Investing and Real Estate
• Earnings
• Media
• Tech News
• Hotel Deals
• Celebrity Real Estate
• Condo Auctions
• Stocks to Buy
• Stocks to Sell
• Real Estate
• Apartments
• Housing Trends

Personal Finance at WalletPop
• Debt
• Fraud
• Insurance
• Loans
• Taxes
• Tax Advice
• Tax Basics
• Tax Forms
• Tax Credit
• Online Tax Filing
• College Finance
• Recalls
• Retirement

Our Partners
• Personal Finance
• 24/7 Wall St.
• Luxury News
• ParentDish
• Tech News
• Download Squad
• TUAW
• Sports News
• Autoblog
• Politics News
• Latino News
• Radio

Terms of Service | Privacy Policy | Trademarks | HELP | Advertise With Us

© 2010 AOL Inc. All Rights Reserved