
Posted on Wed, May. 17, 2006

Public too tolerant of intrusions

By Geof Bowker

There have been two changes in our mode of operating socially in the developed world in the past 20 years -- and perhaps the strangest feature of both is that they have occurred without much public awareness or debate.

First, we are caught up in a frenzy of photography. When the Sept. 11 operatives and London Tube bombers went to work, they were captured on film, recorded -- and in the former case, their packages and persons were screened, and captured on film.

It is hard to visit the United Kingdom today (the most photographed country on Earth) without being aware of the speed cameras looming over the motorways and the surveillance cameras hunched over pub doors or clinging to lampposts. You can't go into a shop without being captured on closed-circuit TV, or take money out of an ATM without leaving behind your snapshot. When a natural disaster occurs, we have pictures and video footage within minutes. We have programs to scan faces at airports to recognize potential terrorists.

Second, we are transfixed by multiple modes of personal data collection.

Supermarkets track our every purchase, and sell the information, so that companies can personalize catalogs to suit our tastes. Online bookstores tell us what we should buy, and what "people like us" buy (keeping up with the Joneses has never been easier). Mortgage lenders and credit card companies obtain our borrowing and payment records in order to aggressively market their institutions' financial products. The U.S. government engages in legally challenged wiretapping and untold Internet monitoring in order to profile our political behaviors.

We, the public, seem to have a comfort factor with Big Brother that we have never had before. After all, the argument goes, if we have never done anything wrong, then we really shouldn't mind all our actions being tracked.

What has happened? And how did it happen so surreptitiously? When I was growing up, a standard argument against over-recording and over-tabulating was that we didn't necessarily trust the folks who were doing it.

We had examples of government overreach (the monitoring of civil rights activists in this country in the 1960s) or abuses of personal data by corporations (telemarketing calls that turned the telephone into an instrument of torture). These examples still stand, but our collective memory of them has faded. For one thing, we have moved into the era of niche marketing. We niche market our surveillance much as others niche market us. There have been a lot of robberies in stores, therefore we need closed-circuit TV. There has been a traumatic attack on our nation, therefore we need more information about everyone. Every invasion of privacy becomes a reasoned response to a particular set of occurrences, just as every killing in a long-running vendetta is a reasoned response by a peaceful group to a particular outrage by some other.

It's all in the framing. When we get into this "response mode" frame around basic human rights, we have already lost the battle. There are always occasions for abrogating the right to privacy. A crime would not have been committed if only we had been able to better track the criminals. Companies can design better, more interesting products for us only if they know our consumer habits.

True and true. And yet a key dimension of freedom is the freedom to transgress. Who in their youth did not commit a peccadillo that today would be immortalized on a police database (and, in the case of at least one youngster I know, MySpace)? And yet a key dimension of the experience of being alive is experimentation.

Where is the bookstore of old where I didn't get pressure to buy what folks like me bought but discovered books serendipitously? So many companies now try to conjure me into one of their categories -- the apparently greater choice offered is offset by the strictures of their stereotyping.

It sounds so antediluvian in today's society to ask for less security, less intelligent capitalism. Let me reframe it then. We are, with all the traces that we are leaving of ourselves, effectively changing who we are.

I love it that I can track down what I said in 1994 to a friend, that I can find a passing acquaintance from 30 years ago, that I can move about the world in such safety. But I really don't like that I am being infantilized -- told what I should or should not buy. I don't like the pervasive atmosphere of distrust -- where security measures of all kinds stand between me and my fellow citizens in the simplest interactions.

Let us get out of the "rapid response, collect all the data you can" mode and into one where we use the wonderful powers

of our information technology to foster a creative society built on and engendering trust.

GEOF BOWKER is the director of the Center for Science Technology and Society at Santa Clara University. He wrote this article for the Mercury News.

© 2006 MercuryNews.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.mercurynews.com>