

Under the lens: Watching in the name of

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If the rather hasty, western view that wants those who refer to themselves in the third person to be in the threshold of schizophrenia is valid, then psychiatrists all over the world should soon start preparing themselves for a huge workload.

Millions of Facebook users have been incorporating such practises for a long time now in their daily online activities, feeling the urge to express their feelings and inform the world of their thoughts and plans.

As if the world did not already know.

Sadly enough for those of us who almost always struggle to come up with upbeat and boasting updates for our virtual statuses, the amount of information that exists out there about us is so extensive, that often it does not leave much space for our buoyant, kind-of-hip version.

A constantly increasing network of applications is designed and installed to stoke a vast system of surveillance, destined to deliver results in the name of promiscuous purposes, from deterrence and control to convenience and marketing.

The 9/11 attacks and the consequent rise of security in the policy agenda undoubtedly accelerated the implementation of such measures. Both the biometrics and the video surveillance industry are growing at a fast rate, with rocketing sales [1] in the last few years. At the same time, surveillance technology is rapidly becoming an important part of the arms trade [2].

“Every breath you take, every move you make”

Ubiquitous security cameras monitor our moves, look down on us while driving and walking, as well as scan the areas we go for shopping and entertainment. They are growing in numbers and getting smaller [3], to the point of invisibility, while more sophisticated technology is enhancing their capacity.

Features such as “Talking CCTV [4]” – in which operators can intimidate via loudspeakers anyone thinking of behaving in an inappropriate manner – and “The Bug [5]” – an “intelligent” system that uses movement tracking software to predict a crime by detecting, zooming in and following those who might be acting in a suspicious way – are not figments of an Orwellian mindset but just a few aspects of the many established trends that govern the “under-the-lens” society.

Under the European Directive on Data Retention, all the fixed-line and mobile operators are required [6] to keep records of their customers’ communications no matter if they are investigated or not. Although the content is not recorded, a range of data that most people value

as private such as the destination, date and duration of phone calls and text messages are stored and could be made available to law enforcement authorities, for up to two years.

The European Commission is also considering a new policy on biometrics, including the creation of a central database of fingerprints [7], while under new proposals all non-Europeans would be asked to submit facial scans and fingerprints [8] before being allowed to enter the continent.

At the same time, governments are ordering the airline carriers to hand over travel records [9] while border agents can seize laptops [10] without cause to search them for criminal evidence; mobile phones with embedded GPS constantly keep an automatic trail of the phones holders' location; shopping centres [11] track the motion of their clients by triangulating their cell phones; credit or debit cards record spending patterns.

The list is enormous and is growing in accordance with technological achievements. How far is the future where individual identification will be based on odour or saliva [12]?

“Digital ghost”

And of course, the surveillance net can creep and perforate virtual walls too. A number of companies, from Internet Service Providers to web-based businesses, are our official online shadows, monitoring all our web searches and visits. They gather data on which sites we visit, at what time and for how long, what do we consume and what we are interested in buying. As Privacy International says [13], “in the off-line world this would be comparable to, for example, having someone follow you through a shopping mall, scanning each page of every magazine you browse though, every pair of shoes that you looked at and every menu entry you read at the restaurant.”

Data mining and behaviour advertising are inextricably associated in the digitised world. Consumerism targeting the individuals by putting them at the centre of all choices seems to have found, in the face of the Internet, an ideal platform to act, as the virtual world is both isolated and public.

Webmail providers, such as Gmail, scan every e-mail read or sent and then display relevant ads keyed to certain words. Charter Communications, the third largest cable operator in the US, has recently spoken of plans [14] to introduce a new system that will capture their customers' online surfing, and then provide the information to advertising networks through a third party.

Just a few weeks ago, a US court ordered [15] Google to give every log of every video watched by Youtube users, including their ID and IP addresses, to Viacom, the media conglomerate. Would that ruling ever be possible if Google did not keep that amount of user data in the first place? [16]

Also, as expected, the aforementioned European Directive on Data Retention applies, of course, to the online world as well, with similar provisions about the monitoring of all internet activity (e-mails, URLs, etc) by the ISPs.

At the same time, the expansion of social networking sites has seen millions of people willingly reveal a vast amount of detailed information about their lives, blurring even further the lines between private and public. This has not gone without cost to many, as their experience of such exposure ranges from minor consequences like personal embarrassment [17] to more grave ones such as job losses [18], lost opportunities [19] and negative profiling [20].

Looking from some distance, it is not difficult to realise that it is rather easy to be deceived by the isolative nature of the online process. Yet, it is essential to truly internalise, beyond the point of simple knowledge, that whatever we do online is leaving an electronic trail behind us that is here to stay.

The understanding of such a reality can undoubtedly create a bleak conception to many over the shape of modern life, as it is not difficult to comprehend how this has the ability to monumentally affect every day choices. Yet, as Bill Thompson puts it, "it is possible to take an optimistic view and treat our current concerns as a reflection of a period of transition and generational difference: we may just be taking our time coming to terms with the new levels of exposure."

"Brave new world"

As different perceptions and prejudices collide in this rapidly changing environment, we still need to find our way around the new system. Today we are wary that online photos showing us drunk at parties could deter recruiters from hiring us, but in twenty years time it is quite likely that most employers will be much more lenient, as they will have their own online past and will be more familiar with such images.

Perhaps in the end we should dare to go one step further. The idea of identity is at the core of the most important debates of our time. Industrialisation and the enlightenment have given us an idea of "self" and of the boundaries between private and public that seem natural but are not. With the industrial age now in a transient stage, we should acknowledge that the concept of identity is itself a social construct and therefore subject to modification. The boundaries are now re-chartered, with technology playing a key role in the process. Bill Thompson explains: "The growth of online services, social tools and surveillance are challenging the assumptions that underpin the enlightenment idea of identity and we will see new ideas emerge to help us cope in an increasingly digitised world where little is truly private."

At the top of this massive wave of public exposure, from the external, omnipresent monitoring to the voluntary revelation of personal and possibly harmful information, lie some fundamental questions whose answers can determine the route of our existence in the interconnected world. Are we willing to sacrifice freedom of expression in the name of avoiding unwanted public exposure? Should we choose between safety and privacy?

These questions can often be misleading and result to extorted choices. Just as liberty requires both [21] security and privacy, respect for the individual and freedom of expression are equally important in the digitised environment. Similar to the annoying prospect of being treated as citizens under constant investigation or as life-long objects in a market research project, there is the danger of encouraging the breeding of "clinical" behaviours by imposing self censorship to avoid potential personal harm.

Such fears can deeply affect our attitude towards a wide set of every day choices. Are we going to care, for example, about the CCTV cameras that monitor our moves if we want to go to a demonstration that condemns the involvement of our country in a war? Are we going to post pictures of that protest on Facebook?

Perhaps our response can draw some inspiration from our previous reactions while other monumental changes were taking place. In the same way that 18th century people dealt with the culture shock of moving from the fields into factories by developing urban culture and its plethora of attitudes and characteristics, we should now adjust our mindset in the modern

conditions and assess what from everything being done is “acceptable and even normal,” as Bill Thompson points out.

Although without the benefit of hindsight, it is not incongruous to underline the historic significance of our generation. The fading memories of the world before the heavy interconnection might be rapidly abandoning us but they have not yet completely evaporated. Without acting as if the standards that dominated the world half a century ago can still be applied today – or have some inherent eternal wisdom – we should boldly enter this brave new world, trying to keep values such as tolerance, respect and openness at the core of the new environment. The burden is heavy and the conditions are not easy. Yet, it is vital to succeed.

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- [1] http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/05_32/b3946008_mz001.htm
- [2] <http://www.interesting-people.org/archives/interesting-people/199512/msg00025.html>
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- [9] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A46610-2004Nov12.html>
- [10] <http://www.theinquirer.net/gb/inquirer/news/2008/02/07/challenged-laptop-seizures>
- [11] http://technology.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/tech_and_web/article3945496.ece
- [12] http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/05_32/b3946004_mz001.htm
- [13] <http://www.privacyinternational.org/article.shtml?cmd%5b347%5d=x-347-65425&als%5btheme%5d=Communications%20surveillance>
- [14] http://news.cnet.com/8301-13578_3-9945309-38.html
- [15] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/7488009.stm>
- [16] http://news.cnet.com/8301-13739_3-9915029-46.html
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