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### Mass Media as Surveillance

It is increasingly apparent that at any moment of day or night, our voices, images, actions and coordinates can be observed, recorded, networked, digitized, analyzed, stored and shared.

The cameras are watching when we drive through an intersection near the change of the light. When we withdraw money from the ATM. When we enter an airport, train station or bus station. When we make a purchase at a convenience store. Whether we take the elevator or walk down the stairs at work.

Our data trails are equally marked. When and where we made that bank deposit, bought that product, took that trip, rented that video, crossed that tollbooth, checked out that book. Why did he buy two different types of toothpaste if he lives alone? Why did she buy a bottle of Jack Daniels, when she says she doesn't drink? He says he's healthy, but he purchased a prescription drug at Walgreen's last week. She's been looking at job search websites this week. He's been googling self-help sites. Her cell phone log shows lots of calls to New York. Suspicious, don't you think?

But not only are our personal activities being monitored, our devices are betraying us as well. Our cell phones reveal our whereabouts, RFID tags on our possessions transmit our data trail, our computers reveal our unique identification numbers to central servers, GPS units track our driving coordinates, even our home computer printers have hidden codes that reveal the user.

This visual, aural, networked and data information leave a shadowy trail of our activities, habits, purchases, health concerns and other evidence that creates a composite picture of who we are. Not just who we want people to believe we are, but who we are in our private lives. Many people have come to believe that having such centralized records, that are available for inspection and purchase, is a strong violation of our rights to privacy and our right “to be left alone.”<sup>1</sup>

This rapidly expanding system of surveillance and dataveillance has been compared to a high-tech panopticon, the engineering solution developed in the 1800s that creates a central point allowing a viewer to observe all activities taking place in any location. From its origin as a tool of incarceration, the panopticon has become ubiquitous, extending from the prison and the factory to the shopping mall and the town square, an ideal mechanism traditionally used by those in power to keep an eye on the socially disruptive lower classes and the have nots. The goal of the panopticon is not only observance, but also transference of self-control to the subjugated. The premise is that merely the idea that the subject is being watched is as good as actually being watched.<sup>2</sup>

Our new electronic panopticon extends the visual control system beyond the physical and architectural domain of structures, streets and dwellings, to the electronic observance of personal habits and activities peculiar to the commercial, medical, entertainment and personal transactions of the populace. In a politically pacified environment such as the United States, where the population is largely rendered politically apathetic through the ideologically and culturally powerful soma administered through the manufacture of consent, the value of consumer activities and economic choice is perhaps more relevant than politics. However, whether the terrain is the battle site over market share for a particular consumer brand or for ideological and political allegiances, a similar seizure of information and data is required. In the lean, globalized, just-in-time production system driven by point-of-sale datastreams, information on the minutest consumer twitch becomes a valuable commodity. This realization has led the transnational corporations to covet the data and analysis of contemporary

consumer buying habits, dredged from electronic card swipes, on-line activities, product registrations and other gimmicks. This same process is equally valuable to political campaigns, that strive to understand and respond to the “buying” trends of the American electorate.

As a society, we have grown accustomed to such investigation. The majority of the public tends to accept the invasion of privacy, devoid of any concrete, articulated reason to oppose it. The majority believes there is no reason to oppose these measures because “they have nothing to hide.” And so, people self-consciously pose for cameras in public spaces, and subconsciously watch what they say on their cell phone, aware that they are being watched, careful not to get caught doing something they may find embarrassing, or that could embroil them in legal problems.

Such logic is hard to argue against. In a post-9/11 world there are terrorists to trap. There are also legitimate businesses that want to capture our demographic urges. Many do not want to consider the subtle effects that follow from such surveillance, that wear down, inhibit and degrade our rights as citizens. For, beyond the obvious invasion of privacy lies an even darker result, a long-term erosion of spontaneous popular expression and public activity.

It has been long surmised that the realization that one is being looked at leads to the development of a strong sense of self-censorship, enforcing a regime of personal inhibition, leading to a subsequent withdrawal from public activities. Over time, this internalized sense of being watched will cause a populace to “act” at all times, and behave according to an assigned script, a prescribed mode of behavior, subsequently abandoning one’s true sense of being a free agent possessing free will. Such a chilling effect is a perfect accompaniment to an already well-established system of mass media that encourages passivity, detachment and futility.

Though many bemoan this degradation of privacy, the technology that supports it continues to grow by leaps and bounds, seemingly moved along by unseen hands. Like a Frankenstein with a video camera, the technology has, according to many, taken on a life of its own. Progress has its price, after all. Libertarian ideologues and technological fetishists alike wring their hands as if nothing can be done, as if there are no human hands that hang the cameras, mount the microphones, tap in the code or execute

the commands. According to this popular position, technology cannot be stopped, nor can it be regulated.

Technology does not have a life of its own, despite the Promethean myths that surround it. There is a wizard behind the curtain, calling out the orders. It only takes someone to pull the curtain aside.

We will then find that the people behind the curtain are prominent players in the institutions that benefit from such intrusions into our personal lives. In fact they have names and addresses, social security numbers and phone numbers. But revealing that of course would be a violation of their privacy.

In the classic dystopian vision, the citizen is stifled by an ubiquitous layer of cameras, microphones and electronic intrusions, making it difficult to do anything but go along with the preordained rhythm of the masses. After all, no one wants to stand out, or struggle against the state-imposed “spiral of silence.” This level of surveillance is already naturalized to many, because communications have always been centralized and dominated by institutions that remain out of the control of the average person. There is really nothing anyone can do, because the citizen has no business challenging the technological and communications decisions made by the experts.

With this bleak assessment, frightfully illustrated by many products of popular entertainment in recent years, it is altogether too easy to fall into the dichotomy of perpetrator/victim, that pits the passive populace against the aggressive authoritarian central corporation or government. In fact, the situation is far more fluid and complex than that.

I would argue that our contemporary information, communication and data environment is not yet our dystopian prison, but more realistically a contested terrain, a contestation that is in great flux, with both victories and defeats for different interests. It is in fact an information war that has been brewing for many decades.

Buried in the history of communications lies the dormant hope of developing a media system that is truly democratic, a two-way system that propagates from sender to receiver, and from receiver to

sender. In contrast, our contemporary media model is constructed around the broadcasting model, enabling a centralized power to control the flow of information and ideas outward to the populace. The audience then participates in a weak “feedback” loop, returning information back to the centralized core, whether it be their responses to programming, their consumer activities, their voting habits, or other personal data. They send in purchase cards, participate in surveys, join focus groups, get retail “club” cards and submit the details of their lives to centralized databases. Thus the American people participate in “two-way” communication.

But all is not bleak.

Surveillance is a double-edged sword. The modern means of surveillance have often been used to repress, harass, exploit and subjugate citizens and workers across the planet, especially those who refuse and resist their assigned roles and status in life. But in many instances, these same tools have also been used to fight back against those same powerful forces, in an attempt to reassert free association, open the democratic process and promote social justice.

Thus, it is not a question of the technology that obtains, records and analyzes visual aural and informational data, but the planned intent, the use and the control of such means. It comes down to a question of power. When citizens generate communications power, they begin to articulate their own media agenda and determine what their issues are that require investigation and discussion. This process can divert the mainstream flow of media and communication and generate a counter-publics own nascent media power. This process, which began decades ago as a little stream and is now a torrent, is one of the prime factors leading to the decline of the centralized and monopolized system of state/corporate information power. In recent decades, we have experienced a steady progression of technologies that have contributed to equalizing the communications balance of power, from instant photographs and photocopy machines, to camcorders and computers, to networks and cell phones.

Counter-surveillance and surveillance

In the mid 1960s, G. William Domhoff wrote a book called “Who Rules America,” an essential book that is as much research as counter-surveillance. Following in the tradition of muckraking journalism, Domhoff revealed the machinations of the US elite, not as an abstract concept, but down to the

individual level, where the people who ruled the US worked, lived, socialized, and entertained. A thread of one such investigation led to the scrutiny of the now infamous Bohemian Grove gatherings, where the rich and powerful gather to play games and network.



(Bohemian Grove)

It was a rude intrusion into the personal lives of the US upper classes, who have always been pleased to have access to scholars who study the social demographics, patterns and habits of the ruled, but certainly not happy to have their own secrets, haunts and mating habits revealed. Thus began a long tradition of power structure research, that investigates the interlocking ties of those who sit on the boards of directors of major corporations, universities, think-tanks and powerful institutions. Such an approach has provided a huge boon to trade unions, environmentalists and other activists who uncover the individuals hiding behind the cloak of the corporation, in order to bear pressure upon offending institutions. An online manifestation of this type of research is Josh On's "They Rule", a site that uses corporate and government data to make connections that were not initially intended.

Research that follows the data trail winding through financial statements, political appointments, interlocking directorates and foreign bank accounts is not the only type of investigation that has proven valuable to confronting a misbalance of power. Conventional types of physical, visual and aural counter-surveillance has proven valuable as well.

The Black Panther Party, perhaps the most influential political movement of the 1960s, began as a counter-surveillance project. The leaders of the BPP, then students at Merritt College in Oakland, decided that the single most important action they could take to assist the Black community was to trail police officers cars in the ghetto, and document cases of harassment and brutality. The Oakland Police Department, that admittedly spied on Oakland's Black community for years, could not bear the thought that the lens could be reversed and turned back towards them. Similar organizations in cities across the US adopted similar tactics, and such counter-surveillance became a common strategy for emboldening communities that had been historically repressed. From film cameras and early portapak video units to digital camcorders and current computer-based distribution networks, such activity has fundamentally altered the impact and scope of counter-surveillance to dramatic proportions.

In the early 1990's a seminal show was curated in Buffalo, NY by the Hallwalls Gallery, entitled "Video as a Witness." The installations and screenings brought attention to the developing power of citizen video and its ability to aid in exposing injustice to the rest of the world. This important program helped develop the idea that repression does not need to remain invisible. Perhaps more importantly, this event helped to illustrate that there was a developing global community interested to both view and contribute to a network of such media.

The Los Angeles uprising in 1992 in response to the video capture of the beating of Rodney King has become perhaps the most visible manifestation of the video as witness. There are, in fact, hundreds of such video captures that have been passed around samizdat-like during that decade. A program produced for Deep Dish Television by Liz Canner, Julia Metzger and LAVA (Los Angeles Video Activists) , entitled "Hands on the Verdict: The The 1992 Los Angeles Uprising" highlighted many such videotaped instances. The group Copwatch, and others like it, continue this police surveillance program to this day. Such surveillance techniques were not limited to video, however. One of the early mini-FM radio activists, Mbanno Kantako, would relay his police scanner through his FM radio

transmitter, so that anyone in his predominately African-American neighborhood with an FM radio could hear the whereabouts and activities of the police. The physical struggle captured on video between Western Shoshone elder Carrie Dann and a federal Bureau of Land Management agent in the desolate high desert of central Nevada was cablecast repeatedly on public access television channels across the United States. Snippets of the tape were broadcast on CNN, and over one hundred copies of it were mailed to leaders of American Indian tribes and members of Congress. The response was an upsurge of support for the Western Shoshone people in their one hundred year old battle against the Federal government for self-determination in their land.<sup>3</sup>



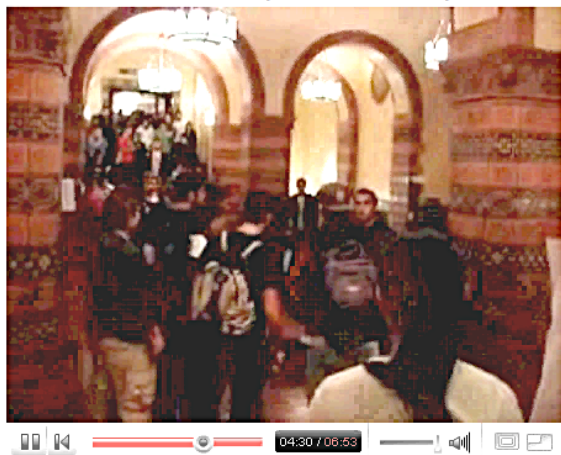
The Shoshone elders were no strangers to technology. They deployed a string of their own surveillance tools to monitor and report back on Bureau of Land Management maneuvers on their land, using radiotelephone units and roving reconnaissance volunteers. The Shoshone also monitored the airwaves for any hint of activity in the area via the police band frequencies. Fax machines and other devices helped them to stay in touch with supporters in the metropolitan areas. The importance of such networking was in place well ahead of the public embrace of the internet.

The rapid growth of the World Wide Web brought a powerful new set of counter-surveillance tools and distribution methods. The same type of electronic tools that benefit the global economic empires of transnational corporations can also be of value to those who choose to push back against such power. Public access to documents, which in the past would remain gathering dust on shelves, have been exposed to mass audiences and thus take on new relevance. For example, the tobacco documents delivered to the UCSF tobacco research group in 1992, that were published on the web, delivered a fatal blow to tobacco industry claims that they did not know the health risks associated with their



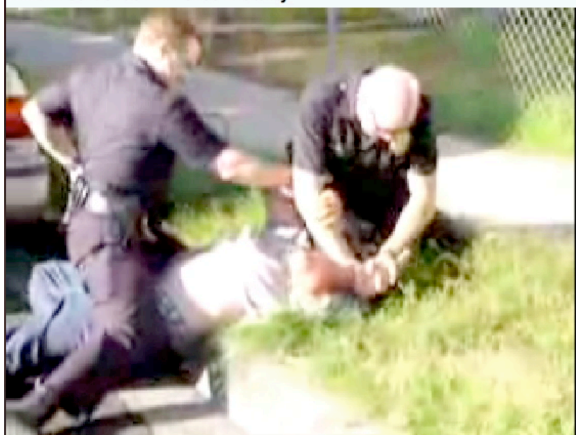
product. Likewise, the purloined e-mails between technicians working for the Diebold Corporation and posted to the web instantly pushed the dangers of electronic voting into the public agenda. Trade union negotiators regularly tap into the financial statements of those they are bargaining with. Industrial workers access the databases of chemical manufacturers for the truth about the health risks posed to those who work with such substances. Increased scrutiny into the fraudulent transmission of finance and capital among the banking interests will undoubtedly reveal new levels of white-collar crime.

**UCLA Student Tasered by Police in Library**



A major part of this new equation is the rapid expansion of social networking computing sites such as MySpace and FaceBook, as well as video delivery sites such as Youtube, Archive.org and Bit Torrent. Such sites are increasingly viewed as the Holy Grail media activists have searched for, to ease the frustration of having many new tools for media production, but little ability to reach a mass audience.

**William Cardenas LA Police Brutality**



Social network spaces are proving integral to the continuation of the counter-surveillance models that began with the early video witness movement. The success of such sites defies broadcast industry

experts who remain obsessed about High Definition programming and 5.1 Surround sound. Industry experts wince at the thought that the new video platform may not be those expensive new HD flatpanels, but the tiny, low-fidelity cell phone, that acts as both camera and monitor.

You Tube is proving to be a central meeting place for investigating and sharing abuse of power in the United States. Some of the more public postings have been the Congressman from Virginia chiding his video taping investigator as “macaca.”

**George Allen introduces "Macaca"**



Viewed many hundreds of thousands of times, the racist epithet “monkey” aimed at the young person-of-color with the video camera, played a large role in the Senators re-election defeat. The killing of William Cardenas by the LAPD as well as the beating of a student in the UCLA library has sealed the reputation of cell phone video as a central element of counter-surveillance by a vigilant public. Most recently, the tragic murder of Oscar Grant by a Bay Area Rapid Transit policeman highlights the power of such media.

Though spin meisters try in vain to “contextualize” these crimes and misdemeanors but the visual and aural power of video is overwhelmingly clear.



Thus far, the arguments presented here have been focused on who's looking at who, and for what ends. The matter gets far more complicated than that, because it leaves out another important element. Very often the camera holder is focusing not on an outward object of investigation, but on the video shooter themselves. It is no secret that a major aspect of social networking is the diaristic, sometimes exhibitionistic uploading of the images, voice and data of the subject him/herself. Millions of people are clamoring to tell the world about themselves, and show the worlds they live in, the rooms they sleep in, and what their hopes, fears and dreams are. For the most part, mainstream media has looked at this trend alarmingly, and brand it as naïve, irresponsible and dangerous. It is increasingly evident though, that such practices are radically changing our notion of what privacy is, and who gets to control it. Perhaps, privacy is not as much a concern in our atomized, depersonalized world. Many people are using the new technologies as a way to reintegrate themselves into a more public life, discovering a new sense of community, relishing the thrill of danger and risk that sometimes accompanies opening oneself to public inspection.

So, in the end, who is watching who?

I don't know, but I'll be watching.

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<sup>1</sup> Dating from a 1928 Supreme Court wiretapping decision called *Olmstead vs. the United States* in which the Supreme Court Justice Brandeis predicted, "ways may someday be developed by which the government without removing papers from secret drawers can reproduce them in court and by which it will be enabled to expose to a jury the most intimate occurrences of the home. Advances in the psychic and related sciences may bring means of exploring unexpressed beliefs, thoughts and emotions."

<sup>2</sup> Attributed to English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham in 1785.

<sup>3</sup> The writer of this paper is the producer of the video referred to, titled "Newe Sogobia is not for Sale!"