

Audra Lindsay in [The Futurist](#)

#TBT: Imagining a Surveillance Society, Circa 1985 📺



For Throwback Thursday this week, we're taking it back to the June 1985 issue of *THE FUTURIST*, in which author Gary T. Marx wrote a fascinating (and perhaps also jussssst a little bit scary?) piece titled *The Surveillance Society: The Threat of 1984-Style Techniques*.

First of all, let's all take a moment to enjoy the amazing art that introduced this article:



So good, right?!

In the piece, Marx reflects on the expansion of undercover practices in the decade prior and makes the case for a future in which governments can bypass limitations by creating "the impression of police omnipresence and omnipotence." He suggests this possible future instead: **"What they cannot do by force or by actual power of their technology, they may attempt to do by creating a 'myth of surveillance.'"**

People may be deceived into believing that control techniques involving computers or lie detectors are far more effective than is the case. Lie detectors, for example, are thought to be most effective when persons being tested believe that they work. A variety of tricks are used to make people believe in their power.

The impression that people are always being watched—by police agents, store detectives peering through one-way mirrors, surveillance cameras, etc.—is one way to deter illegal actions. Any tempting illegal opportunity may really be a police trap, and anyone could be a police agent. In some companies, employees receive memos stating: "Systemic checkings are made of every employee; you never know what day or what hour you are being checked."

Marx goes on to detail various forms of surveillance already in practice in the United States and elsewhere: undercover activities employed by the FBI in criminal investigations, the expansion of programs prompting informants and whistleblowers to take action, and the new crop of devices and electronics operating quietly in the background to capture behavior, conversations, and transgressions.

If Marx imagined that 1985 was not too far off from a 1984-like world, I wonder what he thought come 2013 when revelations about PRISM and other global surveillance programs were publicly disclosed. 🤖

In one passage, he also imagines how "computerization [could make] it possible to bring together routinely bits of previously unrelated information." Kind of like what's already happening today on some levels in our world driven by apps, swipes, streaming content, and massive amounts of data that we carry around in our back pockets, no? 🤖

Imagine the picture that would emerge if all the following were combined: computerized records involving bank transactions, wage payments, purchases by credit cards (including travel and entertainment), books checked out from the library, television viewed on a cable system, telephone calls and electronic mail, medical history, property ownership (cars, home, land, business), and driving, arrest, tax, military service, educational, and work records.



I don't know about you, but this article raises a lot of fascinating questions that I'd love to explore with you all.

Do you think we are still on a brink of a surveillance society (in the way that Marx describes in the article), or have we surpassed these visions and moved into a new era of surveillance?

What are the positive and negative implications of how we've used technology as tools for surveillance in the past 30+ years? Are we poised to make better choices for humanity as a whole, or can we do better?

How do *you* feel about the balance of privacy, surveillance, and information sharing in existence today? What visions for the future do you believe will unfold if we continue on the current path that we're on?

Echoing [Julie Friedman Steele's post from earlier this week](#) here in the World Future Society, I'm also reminded by this question that she posed:

"Seemingly everyday we're shown a glimpse of some future awesomeness that we'll someday have. Also, every day we're seemingly bombarded with the next global disaster that is going to wipe us all out. How do we parse this?"

I feel this in many ways accurately describes the way many of us look at technology today. So *much potential for awesome! But yet, so much potential for destruction!*

How do we reconcile that? And how do we make sense of the good, the bad, and the possible?

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