Surveillance Essay

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This essay was for the class "Introduction to Mass Communication," as taught by Prof. Joanne Malene. The assignment was to observe, record and write about the ways in which we are under surveillance every day.

Surveillance is everywhere. In the daily lives of millions of people, surveillance goes unnoticed and flies under the radar of millions of American citizens. During a twenty-four hour period, I looked for and recorded the ways in which I have been subjected to surveillance in my daily life. There were no police patrollers at my door making sure I was not organizing an anti-Bush rally or anything ridiculous like that; this isn't Nazi Germany, but America maybe isn't as free as it used to be. The amount of surveillance indirectly imposed on the average American is more than I would have ever guessed. As a matter of fact, surveillance is so regular and so people are so oblivious to it that it has become an accepted part of the way our society functions.

When I used to consider the term surveillance, images of F.B.I. agents staking out a criminal's apartment or a rapist stalking his next victim would pop into my head, but the visual of me pumping gas at the local Circle K gas station would never in a million years have been associ-
shopped with, the times when I went shopping, the amount of money I deposited at the bank, the music I listen to, the movies I rent, the food I eat, the sound of my voice, the places I look for jobs, the place I have a job, the things I look at on the computer, the types of e-mails I get and the people I get them from, the amount of time I spend on the phone, and even the people I talk to. In reality, there is no privacy: everyone has and will continue to leave a data trail, whether they know what kind of information they are putting out there or not.

The data trails we leave are not eaten up by birds like in the children’s story; instead they are stored in data bases by the companies we come into contact with during day-to-day life. The places that collected data about me included all the stores I shopped at, the bank I deposited my money at, the hospital I checked job listings in, the gas station I bought my gas from, my job, and even in my own home via the internet and my cell phone. This data is mainly collected to keep me accountable for my actions while I am on the grounds of an establishment. For example, if I walked into Wal-Mart, pulled out a gun and tried to rob the store, and by chance I actually made a great escape and drove away to safety, I would be identified on a video camera and the cops could hold me accountable for the crime I committed.

Another reason companies keep tabs on people, watching what they are buying and what they look at on the internet, is to narrow down advertising. They want to know what you as a consumer like so they can appeal to those preferences and sell the preferred product. One place where this happens often would be the internet. If I look at an e-mail that is titled “free Victoria Secret bras”, then I will probably see more ads on the internet for Victoria Secret products. The people that have access to this information can range from store employees to weird internet hackers. It’s really easy to get your identity stolen with all the information that is available to people. I know from firsthand experience. It would be nice to think that there is limited access, but the reality is there is more information out there about everyone then he or she could imagine or would like to have available to the public.

Data is collected for a few different reasons. It is collected in most cases to try and sell people more of the same store’s product. When advertisers have demographics available to them to narrow down the playing field, their job becomes quite a bit easier. This information can also be used to keep track of spending on a credit card so the correct bill can be issued. Movie places try to monitor what movies you rent, like libraries do with books, to make sure they get their property returned to them.

The information that is collected can be very telling about the person being observed. The information that was collected about me could tell a person anything from the foods I like to eat (bananas) or to the movies I like to watch (“The Little Mermaid”). This same effect would be constant for anyone in my shoes. The surveillance I was under recorded how much I spent, what I spent it on, where I shopped, and many more details. An investigator or stalker could easily follow the trail I left on Friday, November 23, 2007. If it was this easy to get the kind of information some of my closest friends don’t even know, then it would be just as easy to get the same kind of information from anyone, anywhere. The next thing you know, surveillance will increase so much that everyone will be stewing in the government’s kettle, just like Hansel and Gretel almost got cooked in the witch’s kettle, before we even realize we’re being watched. In the end, America is creating its own problems by allowing congress to pass things such as the USA PATRIOT ACT. They say it’s for our protection, but is it really? How much do you want people to know about you? While eating the candy house, it tastes good, but when consequences must be faced and you’re cooking in the kettle, that house isn’t looking quite as appetizing anymore.
Observation #1
LOCATION: Circle K gas station in Ravenna
TIME: 10:39 AM
DATE: 11/23/07
DURATION OF EXPOSURE: 20 minutes
TYPE OF MEDIA: credit card scanner
ACTIVITY: I used my credit card to buy gas.
NOTES: I thought about how long it was taking to pump my gas at first. Then I wondered how the information being recorded got from the gas station pump to the credit card company and onto the record of my account activity.

Observation #2
LOCATION: Marc’s in Ravenna
TIME: 11:01 AM
DATE: 11/23/07
DURATION OF EXPOSURE: 40 minutes
TYPE OF MEDIA: Video Cameras in the store
ACTIVITY: Visiting a friend while my mom shopped.
NOTES: Conscious of the video cameras I repeatedly asked my friend if she was allowed to be talking to me while she was working.

Observation #3
LOCATION: Kohls in Kent
TIME: 12:00 PM
DATE: 11/23/07
DURATION OF EXPOSURE: 35 minutes
TYPE OF MEDIA: Computer Records
ACTIVITY: I signed up for a Kohls card account.
NOTES: I was worried about giving out personal information to a cashier, my social security number in particular.

Observation #4
LOCATION: Wal Mart in Kent
TIME: 1:00 PM
DATE: 11/23/07
DURATION OF EXPOSURE: 2 hours
TYPE OF MEDIA: Video Cameras
ACTIVITY: Grocery Shopping
NOTES: I watched myself enter the store on the monitor above. I also noticed all the black domes covering other video cameras.

Observation #5
LOCATION: Robinson Memorial Hospital in Ravenna
TIME: 3:11 PM
DATE: 11/23/07
DURATION OF EXPOSURE: 35 minutes
TYPE OF MEDIA: Video Cameras
ACTIVITY: Checking Job Postings
NOTES: I noticed myself pin-pointing and looking for video cameras.

Observation #6
LOCATION: Huntington Bank in Ravenna
TIME: 3:50 PM
DATE: 11/23/07
DURATION OF EXPOSURE: 45 minutes
TYPE OF MEDIA: Video camera and voice recorder
ACTIVITY: Depositing money into my checking account
NOTES: I didn’t sing to the radio as loudly as I usually do. This is because I realized the teller could hear me!

Observation #7
LOCATION: Movie Gallery in Ravenna
TIME: 4:40 PM
DATE: 11/23/07
DURATION OF EXPOSURE: 30 minutes
TYPE OF MEDIA: Card scanner and computer data base
ACTIVITY: I used my movie card to rent movies.
NOTES: I wondered how much information about me is stored in their computer and how many people have access to this information.

Observation #8
LOCATION: Bob’s Pizza in Randolph
TIME: 8:45 PM
DATE: 11/23/07
DURATION OF EXPOSURE: 10 minutes
TYPE OF MEDIA: Video Camera
ACTIVITY: While I was at work (Bob’s Pizza) I went out in the drive thru where there is a video
camera to say hi to a friend.
NOTES: I felt a little self conscious about talking
to my friends where co-workers could observe
me.

Observation #9
LOCATION: Home
TIME: 9:43 PM
DATE: 11/23/07
DURATION OF EXPOSURE: 1 hour and 50 min-
utes
TYPE OF MEDIA: Cell Phone
ACTIVITY: I talked to a close friend.
NOTES: When I was on the phone I wondered if
the whole conversation was recorded or if only
the amount of minutes used were recorded.

Observation #10
LOCATION: Home
TIME: 11:45 PM
DATE: 11/23/07
DURATION OF EXPOSURE: 2 hours and 35
minutes
TYPE OF MEDIA: Computer, e-mail log on
ACTIVITY: Logging on to my myspace account
NOTES: After logging on and thinking about the
media trail I leave on the internet I actually ran a
computer sweep for cookies.