

Tech Ethics Animated – Surveillance

Transcript

David Lyon's "From Big Brother to Electronic Panopticon" uses Michael Foucault's Panopticon concept of surveillance and applies it to today's electronic surveillance. The Panopticon consists of a tall guard tower that holds a few guards to overlook the semicircle below where the prisoners are roaming about. The lighting keeps things uncertain as the prisoners are unsure if they are being watched or not at any time. This approach exploits uncertainty as a means of control over the prisoners.

Surveillance is the persistent and unavoidable tracking of individuals to control them. It is a tool to obtain and use information about someone to control that person, as well. Privacy is related to but misses the impact and power dynamic of surveillance.

Surveillance can be done by a single actor, or it can be a byproduct of systematic collection, aggregation, and use of individual data by many companies. A watcher can be anyone: It can be a person, an organization, or a data aggregator. In one well-known case, your car was the watcher. A new technology called vehicle forensics kits, or iVe, manufactured by an American company can tap into a vehicle's history, including its use and information obtained from previous paired mobile devices with an infotainment system. Drivers are oblivious to the fact that cars can generate such data synced from their smartphones. With this technology, companies can provide others with highly sensitive information regarding the individual who previously drove the vehicle. Information such as recent destinations, frequently visited locations, call logs, contact lists, text messages, social media feeds, and so much more is now made available for a price. A federal law enforcement agency has recently entered into a contract for hardware that includes these iVe kits. With access to highly sensitive and personal information, the agency can now surveil any driver using a car with this technology installed. Next time your phone dies, don't be too quick to use the convenient USB port in front of you. While it may charge your phone, once turned on, it will then suck the data into the car.

Companies that contribute to the surveillance of individuals are not the ones that incur the cost or harm that comes from being surveilled. A negative externality occurs when harm is done to others that are not taken into account in the initial transaction. An aggregated negative externality occurs when "everybody else does it." The harm comes from the pervasive practices of the industry. When every company is doing it, they are contributing to a larger surveillance system as they collect, use, and sell consumer data. The single-tracking of an individual violates that one individual's privacy. However, the

systematic collection of data by all the data traffickers such as ad networks, data brokers, and data aggregators creates a surveilled space, and a new industry norm is established. What becomes a common practice can become an accepted practice.

Shoshana Zuboff says surveillance capitalism “is a new economic order that claims human experience as raw, free material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales.” Surveillance is a parasitic practice that feeds off of powerless individuals.

Applying Lyon’s concept of surveillance to a data analytics program, one must examine how the program leads to the accumulation of information about individuals and their direct control and the ability to avoid these harming processes. Lyon argues that just watching is not enough, there needs to be the ability to use this information gathered to control the individual. In the Panopticon, the means of just observing the prisoners was not enough to contribute to a surveilled space. It was the fact that the prisoners were unaware of when they were being observed. The guards in the tower held the power as they could control the prisoners’ behavior.

In a world where your personal information is more accessible, look up to make sure there is no guard tower hovering over you when you are in a public space, in your home, or even while you are in your car.

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Associated Readings

Zuboff, S. (2015). [Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and the Prospects of an Information Civilization](#). *Journal of Information Technology*, 30, 75-89.

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