

Media Life

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In Memoriam

Jan Deuze (1932–2010)
Twannie Deuze (1962–2011)

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CHAPTER FOUR

No Life Outside Media

where we become profiling machines



"If you put intimacy into a system, what kind of intimacy do you get back?" This is the question at the heart of the work of American media artist Jill Magid.¹ One of her installations, "Lincoln Ocean Vector Eddy" (L.O.V.E., 2007), takes on this question by logging encounters with a New York transit officer, who rides the subway all night long randomly searching some of its passengers (such warrantless police searches were introduced after the World Trade Center attacks of September 11, 2001).² Magid asks the officer to search her – deliberately interpreting the new rules literally – and he refuses, after which they start a testy relationship in which she explores to what extent she can feel secure (or not) with him in private or in public. In earlier work, Magid designed and developed a "Surveillance Shoe" (2000): complete with high heels and a built-in surveillance camera pointing upwards, and a battery pack and wireless transmitter embedded in the sole. The video footage of the project gives the viewer a voyeuristic peek up her skirt as she walks across town, while at the same time recording video of the city around her. As she explains, "Due to the fixed position of the camera to the shoe, that leg remains bound within the frame. While this leg appears stable like architecture, the actual architecture becomes mobile."³ By stretching one's subjective experience of (and intimate relationship with) the lived environment to the objects it consists of – such as buildings, fashion and, most deliberately, media – Magid indirectly embraces a media-life point of view in her work.

Other examples of projects trying to bring forth intimacy and agency in omnipresent media can be found in the work of the US-based Surveillance Camera Players and the British Guerrilla Geographers. The Surveillance Camera Players (SCP) formed in New York in November 1996, and consist of a small group of people deliberately performing adaptations of contemporary plays in front of publicly installed surveillance cameras, thus providing the security officers the opportunity to watch some entertainment while they are scrutinizing

the environment.⁴ The group performed pieces in several cities around the US as well as in cities in Europe (including Amsterdam, Munich and Barcelona), and published a book entitled *We know you are watching* (2006), documenting its work, position papers, exhibits and other exploits. Similar groups in France and Australia use omnipresent media to disrupt rather than circumvent society's surveillance systems, generally to – as the Surveillance Camera Players' website states – unconditionally oppose the installation and use of video surveillance cameras in public places. The Guerilla Geographers direct their actions at people rather than those who watch them, as they are “engaged in engaging the public in small bands or groups . . . to cause thought, connected thinking, and stimulate the public and to wear down public resistance to geography, usually carried on by a number of small groups behind public(s) lines.”⁵ When moving about in public spaces, the artists wear clearly visible surveillance cameras (for example, mounted on helmets) and confront the people and place around them to raise awareness of the pervasive and invasive nature of closed-circuit television (CCTV) in everyday life.

The omnipresent and pervasive nature of media raises the specter of a globally emerging surveillance society, in which (in the words of media scholar and activist Felix Stalder) the “creation, collection and processing of personal data is nearly a ubiquitous phenomenon.”⁶ Benchmarking the field of surveillance studies, David Lyon remarks that “All societies that are dependent on communication and information technologies for administrative and control processes are surveillance societies. The effects of this are felt in ordinary everyday life, which is closely monitored as never before in history” (2001: 1). In later work, Lyon defines surveillance as “the focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for purposes of influence, management, protection or direction” (2007: 14). Beyond noting that surveillance is, at the very least, an ambiguous concept carrying benevolent as well as clandestine

connotations, Lyon calls attention to what surveillance does to people – how we act or feel differently in a given situation or place-knowing (or assuming) that our behavior may be monitored, tracked, recorded and watched. This does not necessarily mean people feel more or less secure this way, nor does it fundamentally constitute an invasion of privacy. Even before the rapid proliferation of CCTV worldwide, and well in advance of sophisticated user profiling enabled through commercial Internet Service Providers, David Altheide observed in the 1980s how people, in the real or perceived presence of photo and video cameras, increasingly behaved in terms of what he labeled a *media self* (1984), always aware of at least the possibility of being captured in media. According to Altheide, such a persona is deeply performative, and learns (or is forced to learn) to constantly adapt to changing mediated circumstances. Lawrence Grossberg similarly foresaw an emerging “everyday world of media life” (1988: 389; italics added) experienced everyday in terms of our overwhelming orientation to omnipresent media. We are all surveillance camera players, and have been for quite a while.

Discipline, control and suspicion

Being seen changes our behavior. Monitoring, in this context, comes in many forms – and gets exploited for a variety of purposes. In his influential book *Discipline and punish* (1995[1975]), Michel Foucault extends this fundamental aspect of our biological wiring to the way society organizes itself around practices and expectations of surveillance. Foucault makes a powerful argument for looking at all social institutions – including schools, the military, factories, the office workplace, hospitals, as well as the modern family – as disciplinary mechanisms for monitoring and supervising people intended to instill docility and a consensual, one-size-fits-all morality. One would assume only prisons fulfill such a specific function, but Foucault challenges that

conjecture, instead arguing that the prison is just the specialized and preeminent locus of the realization of a disciplined and orderly society, embodying the ideals of "surveillance and observation, security and knowledge, individualization and totalization, isolation and transparency" (249).

Foucault's work is relevant for concerns regarding media life for two reasons. First, because he relates the emergence of a disciplinary society, as based on continuous surveillance and examination of its participants, to the rapid rise of technologies and corresponding bureaucracies during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Second, his genealogical trajectory mirrors media history insofar as today's concerns about ubiquitous and pervasive media can be seen as a logical extension of a development that has its roots not in omnipresent cameras or sophisticated digital tracking technologies, but in the self-organization of society as a whole. Gilles Deleuze extends Foucault's predictions by suggesting that a successfully disciplined society based on our willing participation in vast spaces of enclosure (i.e. schools, factories, hospitals, prisons) ultimately would fade to the background, giving way to more subtle and therefore much more powerful ways of controlling the movements and actions of people.⁷ With Deleuze, Richard Sennett (2006) discusses how, in the current culture of capitalism, the factory as a model and concrete embodiment of control is replaced by the corporation, exerting influence not through constituting (and monitoring) its employees as a particular group working together at a specific place, but rather by having temporarily assembled teams of individuals who compete with each other and among themselves for a chance to work and be recognized for working. Such temporary alliances are, furthermore, increasingly stretched across geographical and temporal boundaries, as corporate holdings and their associated production networks span the globe.

If today's work environment increasingly embodies a social system governed by individually internalized modes of control, so is the contemporary family, as the supposed cornerstone of

society or even civilization (as politicians and the clergy often like to state), turning into a dispersed and continually reassembling network. As in the contemporary workplace, the ties that bind the family as a more or less cohesive social unit are primarily sustained through monitoring at-a-distance, rather than through direct supervision. Family surveillance in the media-life context often works quite literally, as evidenced by trending styles of helicopter parenting experienced by children well into early adulthood. Considering the philosophy of *frictionless sharing*⁸ informing the functionalities of social media such as Facebook and Spotify, Mary Gray reminds us of the way surveillance technologies mediatized the lives of teenagers in general and college students in particular, from the start: "While many members of earlier generations may find this level of self-disclosure and showcasing a tad creepy, remember: this is the nannycam generation. These students have been closely monitored and on display since they were in diapers. Is their comfort with online exposition (or exhibitionism) so surprising?" (2007: 74).

Canadian journalist Carl Honoré (2008) describes in-vogue mediated styles of parenting as *hyperparenting*, exemplified by the tendency of parents to closely monitor and track (and, when perceived necessary, like a helicopter swooping down, to intervene in) the lives of their children. According to Honoré this parenting style is a global phenomenon, fueled in part by a consumer culture's expectations of the possibility of a perfect life, with corresponding pressures to create the perfect childhood. In the context of today's work-centered lifestyles among middle-class families, much of this fretting over whether the kids are all right takes place in media. David Morley brings to mind the British example of the KidsOK service (operating from 2004 onwards), whereby a charity-supported commercial company provides parents with a mobile mapping service that automatically sends information on the location of their child's mobile – equipped with a global positioning system (GPS) receiver – to their cell phones. Referring to these and

other cases of parental surveillance internationally, Morley concludes that "This is a world in which virtual parenting now has to carry some part of the burden of childcare and where being in electronic contact with a child . . . may come to play an increasing role in patterns of childcare" (2007: 208).

The combination of parenting, surveillance and media life – Morley uses the term *teleparenting* – can further manifest itself through installing technology in cars that allows at-a-distance monitoring of location and speed (and in the case of the Teensurance program of the Safeco Insurance company in Seattle, it can also remotely unlock car doors, call for roadside assistance, and shut off the ignition when parents want to control the automobile movements of their teenage child).⁹ Communication researchers James Hay and Jeremy Packer contextualize the gradual move of sophisticated media and communications technologies from the office and home into the car in terms of how the supposedly liberating potential of auto-mobility and mobile communication gets deployed to enable finer forms of surveillance, social scrutiny and control. Referring to the work of Belgian sociologist Armand Mattelart, Hay and Packer argue that "movement and connectivity, particularly as they have been bound up with a concern about freedoms, are profoundly matters of governance – of governing oneself, of being governed through technologies, rules, routes and also (though not primarily) by political government" (2004: 218). In his book *The globalization of surveillance* (2010[2007]), Mattelart signals the emergence of a global *surveillance society* emerging from and existing next to discipline and control societies, based on a "mode of governing society by tracking" (of bodies and goods), whereby a preferred and ostensibly propagandized lifestyle of self-constraint and constant vigilance fuses with "new systems of full-time remote surveillance based on the inquisitorial power of information technology" (198).

Although discipline, control and suspicion, according to Foucault, Deleuze and Mattelart, seem absolute, the essence

of such analyses of the human condition is the way they reveal power to command, to cultivate and to catechize concern as distributed across all elements and aspects of society (and not just resting in the hands of a secret or disreputable elite), being part and parcel of even the most mundane and intimate experiences of everyday life. Discipline, therefore, is enforced as well as (potentially) subverted by all individuals in everything they do. A second marker of these three thinkers' work in the story of media life follows directly from this observation, as power is not something that is essentially embodied by a select few, but rather must be considered as something always felt and acted upon, but never seen. Like media, power is everywhere yet nowhere – as it generally seems invisible or hardly noticeable to us. And much like media, such power is omnipresent, always watching (and recording) us in everything we do. As our lives move into media, monitoring has become a mundane, perhaps even *desirable*, part of social subjectivity.¹⁰

O Big Brother, wherefore art thou?

The various takes on the ubiquity of power through the practice of monitoring take their original cue from the writings of Jeremy Bentham, an English jurist and philosopher, who in the late seventeenth century proposed a model of a disciplined and orderly society based on being able to see everything and everyone all the time. Bentham called his principle of construction and plan of management a "Panopticon" (translation: all-observing).

In 1786 Bentham visited Russia to see his brother Samuel, who was charged with supervising a large number of workers and businesses in operation on the estate of Prince Potemkin.¹¹ In a series of letters to his father back home in London, Jeremy reflected on this experience, particularly regarding the intricate solutions his brother came up with to keep order among all the people under his supervision. These letters were eventually published in 1791, featuring his

proposal for a plan of management "containing the idea of a new principle of construction applicable to any sort of establishment, in which persons of any description are to be kept under inspection."¹² This "inspection principle" would govern all orderly interactions between people in a space larger than just a block of buildings, according to Bentham, and its purpose was that of "*punishing the incorrigible, guarding the insane, reforming the vicious, confining the suspected, employing the idle, maintaining the helpless, curing the sick, instructing the willing in any branch of industry, or training the rising race in the path of education*" (italics in original). For Bentham, people working, learning, shopping, or doing just about anything else under constant surveillance would guarantee they would always be doing what they were expected to do.

Bentham's optimistic suggestions for a near-perfect society operating under conditions of invariable inspection clearly resonate in contemporary scholarship and literature, featuring prominently in George Orwell's book *Nineteen eighty-four* (1949). In this work, Orwell describes a totalitarian society whose citizens live under constant surveillance via omnipresent telescreens, which are monitored by the Thought Police.¹³ People are reminded of this surveillance through televised advertisements and posters with the slogan "Big Brother is watching you" – but no one really knows who Big Brother is, or whether he is in fact a real person. Orwell clearly puts a more pessimistic spin on Bentham's utopian vision, raising doubts about the supposed benevolence of a centrally organized apparatus of inspection. His dystopian depiction of the consequences of a conformity-demanding all-pervasive surveillance system has been cleverly adopted by the advertising industry to rally consumers behind the banner of supposedly different, edgy or otherwise non-conformist products and services. The key example would be Apple's "1984" advertisement, which was directed by Ridley Scott and broadcast only once on American television on January 22, 1984. In the video a young woman dressed in Apple colors to represent Apple's

Macintosh personal computer destroys a giant telescreen featuring *Big Brother* (representing Apple's rival, IBM) as a means of saving humanity from conformity.¹⁴ In 2004 the commercial was remixed and rebroadcast to introduce the iPod, and it has been parodied many times, including on March 5, 2007 by a supporter of at-that-time US Senator Barack Obama, inserting images and sound bites of Hillary Clinton (as Big Brother) and the logo of the Obama election campaign (on the shirt of the young woman) into Apple's 2004 remake of its original 1984 ad.

The juxtaposition of conformity against originality as an expression of concerns over omnipresent surveillance provides a seductive platform – not just for intellectual exploration, but also for compelling entertainment. In 1999 the reality television show *Big Brother* premiered on Dutch television as the brainchild of John De Mol Producties (today part of Endemol Holdings, owned by Spanish telecommunications company Telefónica). The show featured 12 people living in a house outfitted with cameras everywhere, initially streaming their video recordings live on the Web. The day's footage was presented in a rigorously edited format for a daily primetime television broadcast. The show became massively popular, and local or regional editions and adaptations can be seen on television stations all over the world. Its central premise – an audience watching people coexist in a confined space with the power to vote individuals off the show (and thus out of their community of choice) – resembles Bentham's intentions for a panoptic plan of people management, as it is based on one's ability to see without being seen, to give "transient and incidental directions" determining what happens to those under surveillance.¹⁵ There is something to be said for a view on life in our immersively mediated society as resembling, at least in part, the lived experience of a contestant in a massive reality television show, where you seem to have little or no control over the decision to vote you off – as in when or how you will lose your job, your partner, and even your home. All seem

to be contingent upon the whimsical and intangible movements of global capital, markets, information and ideas, and your best bet is to be on public display (and on best behavior) at all times. As social network scholar danah boyd suggests about people's tendency to overshare personal information online, "in many situations, there is more to be gained by accepting the public default than by going out of one's way to keep things private. And here's where we see the shift. It used to take effort to be public. Today, it often takes effort to be private."¹⁶

Orwell's book and the *Big Brother* television format only pick up the pragmatic parts of Bentham's work. More significant than Bentham's proposals for building and managing a specific inspection infrastructure are his philosophical ideas about the purported consequences of surveillance for the way people work, live and play. As he writes in his first letter:

Ideal perfection, if that were the object, would require that each person should actually be in that predicament [of being under constant surveillance], during every instant of time. This being impossible, the next thing to be wished for is, that, at every instant, seeing reason to believe as much, and not being able to satisfy himself to the contrary, he should *conceive* himself to be so. (*italics in original*)

In the fifth letter to his father, Bentham adds that "the persons to be inspected should always feel themselves as if under inspection, at least as standing a great chance of being so." What Bentham suggests – and what Foucault uses to ground his powerful theory of panopticism – is that surveillance in itself is not all-important. In fact, for a Benthamian ideal society to exist, only the *illusion* of surveillance is necessary: people need to think (at least most of the time, and in all things they do) that they are watched, tracked and monitored. Such an illusion is produced by people as individuals: we behave differently in situations where we think we are being watched. This can work quite literally, as studies show how people behave more cooperatively in places where there

are subtle cues of observation – such as posters on the wall featuring close-ups of human eyes (as reported in a 2010 British experimental study by psychologists Max Ernest-Jones, Daniel Nettle and Melissa Bateson). Social scrutiny, enhanced and amplified by media, induces an evolved psychology of cooperation.

People-profiling service 123people used international Data Privacy Day (January 28) in 2011 to release the results of an online survey with 1,700 respondents (located mainly in Europe and North America), reporting that the vast majority of study participants felt that their personal information was at risk on the internet.¹⁷ Most people also mentioned that individuals, not institutions, are responsible for safeguarding people online. Although few reported ever experiencing anything problematic because of free-floating mediated personal information, people are still convinced it is a tremendously powerful source for unarticulated threats, and refer to self-censorship as a preferred disciplining mechanism. One is reminded that thinking carefully about the role media play in everyday life should refer not only to the artifacts we use and see, nor just to what people generally do with them. Media fit into daily life in all kinds of complicated ways, and contribute to shaping our lives especially by their invisibility: we stop to think about media deliberately, and therefore assume their omnipresence (unless they break down). It is exactly at that moment, following Bentham, that media become all-powerful.

Panopticism revisited

Instead of using a notion of panoptic surveillance as a metaphor for the general control apparatuses of state and corporate institutions, or more concretely as an instance of the supposedly efficient administration of people and therefore of bureaucratic social control (as originally envisioned by Max Weber), in a media life it is necessary to theorize the process of universal inspection as a rather mundane

function of everyday life. This would include, as Stephen Green advocates, "a sensitivity . . . to the fact that surveillance – intensified, diversified and empowered by information technologies – contains both urges for control and facilitation, for social management and social empowerment" (1999: 27). As a first step to that effect, Mark Poster considers people's total immersion in digital communication networks as a unitary discipline mechanism, all the more powerful because "the population participates in its own self-constitution as subjects in the normalizing gaze of the Superpanopticon" (1990: 97). Poster's *superpanopticon* as a model of society awash with electronic eyes has no technical limitations as it moves beyond a top-down regime of corporations and governments to include each and every individual (as long as he or she is a consumer – that is, someone with a social security number, a bank account or credit card). Simply by moving in public space, communicating electronically or making a purchase, we silently agree to be part of a panoptic society.

At the heart of panoptic surveillance operating in society, argues Greg Elmer in *Profiling machines* (2004), is its complete reliance on the collection of personal information bundled with the storage and cross-referencing of such data. Elmer emphasizes the automatic nature of such panoptic processes, as we are generally not (made) aware of the fact that our information is collected – for example when we use a cash machine, when we visit a website, when we program something on a digital video recorder. Ours is a personal information economy, concludes Elmer, governed and structured by profiling machines: media that hunt, gather, sort and archive data in order to discriminate individuals into previously categorized consumer lifestyle groups. On the one hand, this potentially makes media life easier: sophisticated systems that can predict what we want (and when we want it) remove uncertainty from the dilemma of choice, "and by extension the need to make conscious decisions is replaced by an uncannily familiar world of images, goods, and services" (2004: 244). Elmer

makes a point similar to that in the work of Richard Grusin on the premediating logic of contemporary media, claiming that the functioning of digital media is premised on this ability to expose people's private lives to the world (more specifically to companies and markets), and to aggregate past behaviors in order to predict future ones. Tackling the same process from the other side, cultural theorist Eva Illouz shows throughout her work how our current confessional culture relies on emotional self-surveillance in service of largely economic and political expectations of a *perfect self*. In the process of publicly performing identities, Illouz argues, people narrate and come to experience their lives as "media-like lifestyles" (1997: 182).

By narrating our existence, we see ourselves and each other live. Importantly, this kind of mediated panopticism does not just rely on self-disciplining in order to fulfill real or perceived expectations, but in fact can offer quite significant rewards: bargains at stores or perks with airlines for participating in customer loyalty programs, special status conferred based on recurring visits to an online service, discounts following the advice of automated product recommendation systems (such as at Amazon and other online retailers), and so on. Apparently it is in our best interest to cooperate, making the panoptic surveillance system seem benevolent and participatory in nature – even though it punishes for opting out: limiting choice, denying discounts, downgrading creditworthiness, barring access altogether. Participating in surveillance processes is not without consequences for users, as Mark Andrejevic (2009) reminds us. According to Andrejevic, the emerging online economy exploits the work of being watched. As users of all kinds of cards, as people under constant surveillance while being in public, and as online shoppers, we provide value-generating labor for the business and corporations that collect, record, mine or sell data about us. In doing so, we extend the work we were already doing for companies simply by watching television or listening to the radio: we were making ourselves available to be sold as

audiences to advertisers. Media in this context provide the accelerant the global economy needs to sustain itself: providing access to potential markets and target demographics while at the same time opening up options and opportunities for consumers. While free software like iTunes makes available seemingly limitless libraries of artists and songs, these programs at the same time document, map and record the entire music inventory of their users. While a digital video recorder facilitates the simultaneous watching and recording of content across a bewildering range of TV channels, it offers up a lifetime of viewing behaviors for the companies involved. Combining different genres and forms of media in his analysis of surveillance in everyday life, Andrejevic documents how: "the elaboration and proliferation of desire is achieved through subjection to a discursive regime of self-disclosure whose contemporary cultural manifestations include not just the mania for interactivity, but the confessional culture of a talk show nation, and, most recently, the ethos of willing submission to comprehensive surveillance associated with the booming reality TV trend" (2002: 234).

Investigating how people perceive and understand surveillance in their daily lives, Kirsty Best finds that her study participants either think that there is a legitimate case to be made for surveillance, or more generally feel that "stopping participating in digital life [is not just] unpalatable . . . it is in fact impossible" (2010: 19). For Best, the fact that people tend to see surveillance as expedient at best, or as inevitable at worst, raises the question of whether consent can truly be said to exist. A key issue in this context must be the level of transparency about surveillance practices and their potential consequences available to those scrutinized. Given the pervasive and largely automated nature of surveillance mechanisms, it is perhaps safe to say that a clear and complete picture of the entire surveillance ecosystem remains elusive to all involved – including the very organizations implementing or commissioning surveillance in the first place.



In their 2006 report for the British Information Commissioner featuring detailed case studies of the consequences of surveillance in people's everyday lives, researchers from the Surveillance Studies Network confirm that it affects the entirety of the family's life chances, decision-making and relationships.¹⁸ Consider, for instance, the ways in which all kinds of databases are linked by private companies, as well as government agencies to deny or allow people access to specific social services (and even countries), to support or withdraw investments in particular areas or townships, and even to connect or bypass people in their search for a romantic partner at an online dating service. Elmer concludes his analysis of our personal information economy – an economy dominantly driven by detailed, historical information about individuals

– expressing a grave concern: “Thus, as we watch and monitor others and are ourselves monitored, our preferences are fed back to us, producing an all-too-familiar environment . . . As a consequence, we may soon find it compellingly easy and convenient to consume ‘more of the same’, or conversely, increasingly more difficult to find something different” (2004: 245).

Beyond the economy and marketplace, similar panoptic processes are at work in the realms of education, labor and politics. The administration of increasingly complicated, customized and individually fine-tuned pathways through the maze of contemporary educational institutions demands considerable surveillance capabilities. As systems of higher education worldwide expand rapidly – in the process innovating and further developing existing programs, adding all kinds of new courses, curricula or even disciplines – the need for constant monitoring and tracking the progress of students, faculty and staff increases exponentially. The internationalization of higher education, furthermore, increases the level of student surveillance as it functions across different institutions, countries and regional systems.

Sometimes, a real or perceived need to keep track of students, coupled with the pervasive nature of universal convergence technologies in all aspects of everyday life, has institutions scrambling for surveillance mechanisms in ways that expose the general lack of reflective awareness people tend to have regarding their media. Consider, for example, the Lower Merion School District of Ardmore, Pennsylvania. With several other high schools around the US it participated (during the 2009–10 academic year) in a state-funded program that provided all of its students with a laptop computer. As a security measure, the school opted to install software for activating the built-in webcam of these laptops remotely. None of the students (nor their parents) were informed of this decision. In fact, people only found out about the arguably rather intrusive surveillance system after school officials

sent a letter to one of the students reprimanding him for “improper behavior,” an accusation which was supported by pictures taken of the student while he was alone in his bedroom at home – images silently recorded and sent back to the school’s IT department by the free laptop’s camera. One of these pictures showed him sleeping, and another one eating candy – which officials apparently considered to be “pill-popping” (as reported in *Wired* magazine of April 16, 2010). After concerned parents filed a lawsuit, thousands of webcam pictures and screen shots featuring many students were discovered on the school’s computer servers. As a consequence, the school suspended its surveillance program – pending further investigation. As is common with media in general and surveillance systems in particular, we tend to only become acutely aware of them when they break down.

Like the fields of work and education, national governments and multilateral organizations (such as the European Union) are systematically increasing their surveillance of people and places, for example by passing legislation that requires telecommunications companies to store and make readily available source, destination and other data on any kind of mediated communication. All kinds of electronic gateways and technologies monitoring and screening access to public areas, such as airports, bus and train stations, sports facilities, parks and shopping malls, have become commonplace. Through such ubiquitous surveillance of public space, writes Finnish geographer Hille Koskela, “the panoptic technology of power has been electronically extended, making our cities like enormous panopticons” (2000: 243). Koskela argues that the rapid increase of surveillance technologies in city centers and other urban areas is intended to extend the sense of safety and security provided in out-of-town shopping malls and office parks into public space. In other words: through omnipresent media (operating as technologies of panoptic surveillance) public space becomes subject to the same rules and expectations of exclusivity (and

corresponding perceptions of security) as the private places where we live.

The ensemble of surveilling mechanisms available to the state – including but not limited to national DNA databases, closed circuit television cameras in public places, identity documents outfitted with digital biometrics, and the ability to link and cross-reference across any and all computerized catalogs – is rather daunting. A particularly intimidating example of such tools affecting everyday life on the streets of neighborhoods is the ongoing development of talking CCTV cameras. Fitted with speaker facilities, such cameras allow human monitors to directly address people under surveillance in public spaces. In the UK such cameras are, for example, used in Middlesbrough, “where people seen misbehaving can be told to stop via a loudspeaker, controlled by control centre staff.”¹⁹ In the US, a similar instance can be found in a low-income housing complex in Washington, DC, whereby “residents and guests alike who have violated the stringent apartment rules have been singled out over the intercoms and given orders such as ‘get off the steps,’ ‘no chairs allowed in the playground area’ or, perhaps most common, ‘no loitering.’”²⁰ The systems are put in place by commercial companies and tend to be funded through government grants and subsidies.

David Lyon cautions against an undifferentiated view of power, as prisons are not the same as schools, and the kind of power enforced by the state is markedly different from that wielded by commercial enterprises. On the other hand, one has to consider that new-technology contexts do blur the boundaries between society’s institutions, their processes, and thus their practices of power. To treat surveillance mechanisms separately, in terms of the economy, education, the military and the state, ignores the many ways in which these institutions and their panoptic processes are linked. Government agencies enforce the copyright protections claimed by corporations. Internet Service Providers provide the police protocols for (and access to) people’s online

communications and browsing histories. Companies sell and exchange consumer profiles that can be matched with public records (such as real-estate ownership, property tax databases, professional and business licenses and court files).

A final dimension to the issue of panoptic surveillance is distinctly technological, as it refers to machines keeping track of (and communicating exclusively with) other machines. Here, the twin forces of media’s increasing ubiquity and invisibility collude to produce an environment of context-aware computing, next-generation networks, and intermedia communications – in other words, an *internet of things*, heralded in a 2005 report by the International Telecommunications Union as a new dimension to be added to “the world of information and communication technologies (ICTs): from *anytime*, *any place* connectivity for *anyone*, we will now have connectivity for *anything*” (italics in original).²¹ The internet of things, defined as a global internet-based information architecture facilitating the exchange of goods and services, according to some, will come to dominate mediated interactions. Benchmarked by the ability to tag objects with information that can be read at-a-distance by other objects, the internet of things provides ways to identify and coordinate flows of information, products and services between different technological systems. A constituent system for the internet of things is Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology, allowing any kind of object to be tagged with an electronic label that can be read at a short distance (up to several meters) for the purpose of identification and tracking using radio waves. RFID technology is used in a wide variety of everyday situations around the world: from electronically collecting fees for toll roads and facilitating entering and exiting buildings or public transit systems, to scanning products in grocery stores, passports at airports, books in public libraries, and student IDs at schools – up to and including implanting RFID tags in animals and humans.²²

A specific example of a contemporary surveillance option at work in the private sphere comes to mind when considering

the way overdeveloped societies tend to their elderly citizens. American researchers Sheri Reder and colleagues (2010), for example, fitted a range of objects in the homes of 12 elderly people with RFID tags – including the senior citizens themselves, with labels embedded in wristbands. The purpose of the system was to remotely monitor four activities: meal preparation, physical activity, vitamin use and personal care, and to convey this information in real time to the elder's family and caregivers. The researchers found that people used the technology as a passive alert system and communication tool. The trial participants – specifically the senior citizens and their children – reported an increase in perceived safety and peace of mind. The system, called Technology for Long Term Care (TLTC), correspondingly claims to help people keep an eye on their elderly parents without the need to visit them every day. Without a hint of irony, the government-funded project describes the key RFID element of TLTC, Sysgen TracPoint, on its website:

Sysgen TracPoint utilizes state of the art, RTLS (Real Time Location System), RFID wireless monitoring technology that enhances effective management of long term care provider's greatest assets: its residents . . . TracPoint allows staff to quickly find the location of a resident, staff member or a critical piece of equipment quickly . . . Wireless RTLS resident tracking and elopement prevention functions allow for a more home-like, less restrictive environment while increasing effective behavior and wandering management . . . The wireless system permits resident monitoring in outside areas for increased resident freedom.²³

The US-based PositiveID Corporation is one of the few international companies that produces and markets human-implantable microchips – under the VeriChip® brand – and remote bio-sensor systems that can be used for building access control and patient identification purposes, but that, as PR stunts, have also been deployed to allow night clubs in Barcelona, Rotterdam and Glasgow to remotely identify their

most important clients. As reported in UK newspaper the *Guardian* (on January 16, 2005), club owners like the advantages of such a surveillance system, as it allows bartenders and other club personnel to greet special customers by name, and pour their favorite drink without them having to ask for it in person.²⁴ In a story for the Associated Press (on July 23, 2007), Todd Lewan summarizes the debate about implantable microchips with specific reference to Big Brother:

To some, the microchip [is] a wondrous invention – a high-tech helper that could increase security at nuclear plants and military bases, help authorities identify wandering . . . patients, allow consumers to buy their groceries, literally, with the wave of a chipped hand. To others, the notion of tagging people [is] Orwellian, a departure from centuries of history and tradition in which people had the right to go and do as they pleased without being tracked, unless they were harming someone else.²⁵

Beyond the debate whether machinic surveillance is a good or bad thing, the developments in technology and media seem to go on unfettered, slowly but surely moving in (and in-between) all aspects of everyday life. The previously mentioned 2005 ITU report extols the virtues of this internet of things saying that it “will radically transform our corporate, community, and personal spheres” – for example by creating “smart homes for smart people,” as well as a wide array of “smart things” that would be beneficial not just to commercial ventures, but also for “healthcare, defense or education” (2005: 2, 4, 6). Katherine Hayles raises perhaps the most profound stake when it comes to media-life-inspired concerns about surveillance in general, the internet of things, and the role of RFID technology in particular. To her, the key to our consideration of RFID as one addition to an increasingly sophisticated array of panoptic surveillance mechanisms is the suggestion that the world of objects around us ceases to be one that is passive and inert. Instead, we are now moving – whether we want to or not – through an altogether animate environment:

"Combined with embedded sensors, mobile technologies and relational databases, RFID destabilizes traditional ideas about the relation of humans to the built world . . . The challenge RFID presents is how to use it to re-think human subjectivity in constructive and life-enhancing ways without capitulating to its coercive and exploitive aspects" (2009: 48).

Consider for a moment moving through a world of objects that not only become meaningful through our handling of them (i.e. switching them on or off, throwing or pushing them, and so on), but are powerful as they handle us – by communicating with each other on the basis of data gathered in real time. Hayles considers RFID technologies in everyday life as distributed cognitive systems – like human beings are – making sense of the world by virtue of their (mediated) connections. All of a sudden our access to a specific place can be granted – or denied. A particular product is to be had – or seems unavailable. Someone responds, ready and willing to speak with us and address our query – or the device we used to access a service (for example, a phone or intercom system) remains eerily silent. Such decisions are made on the basis of things interacting with other things, relating information about people and products and past behaviors stored in different databases. The objects in our environment – the groceries in our shopping bags, the devices in our pockets, the doors through which we enter or exit man-made structures – are, in some way, alive. In the end, Hayles calls not (only) for strategies and tactics vis-à-vis surveillance, but critically considers how our engagement with media is "primarily and fundamentally an ethical struggle that continues as long as life in any form exists" (64–5). It is not just about how to interact with technology, but rather (or at the very least also) about what kind of technologies to design that truly allow us to take responsibility for what we want of this world.

Reverse engineering the panopticon

A second step towards considering the full potential and implications of surveillance in media life must also move beyond exclusively top-down principles of inspection (where the few scrutinize the many), and consider the same process in reverse. This yields a context of synoptic surveillance, where the many watch the few. Norwegian sociologist Thomas Mathiesen introduced the notion of a synopticon in the context of the relationship between (mass) media and society – something, he argued, Foucault originally overlooked. For Mathiesen, magazines, radio and especially television open up the world of celebrities and politicians to the surveillance of mass audiences – not that dissimilar from ancient spectacles such as the performance of actors in theatres where the many watched the few. What is furthermore significant about this history, argues Mathiesen, is that "panopticism and synopticism have developed in intimate interaction, even fusion, with each other" (1997: 223; italics in original). In doing so, he emphasizes a key point about the contemporary technologies that provide the artifactual backdrop to media life: the same hardware and software that makes total top-down surveillance of individuals possible enables those same individuals to "look back" relatively unseen at those who survey them. John Thompson's take on synopticism and media life extends this capacity of making visible and seeing without being seen as "not just the outcome of leakage in systems of communication and information flow that are increasingly difficult to control: it is also an explicit strategy of individuals who know very well that mediated visibility can be a weapon in the struggles they wage in their day-to-day lives" (2005: 31).

In a review of how terrorist groups and extremist movements use media, and outlining the response of mainly US security organizations, Gus Martin (2010) similarly alludes to the fact that people on both sides of the spectrum use digital technology and media extensively to find and produce

information to further their aims. Using examples such as videos of hostage beheadings posted online and the pictures of torture victims at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq (in late 2004), Thompson considers how the new visibility of people and events is stretched out in time and space – as we can watch events happening in real time (through streaming video online and live television) and at the same time endlessly revisit digital recordings – while most of these acts of seeing are not reciprocal: the people watched generally cannot see us in return. This consequence of the mediatization of society clearly raises the stakes for those who want or need to be seen.

An important nuance in our take on society as established through mediated visibility and systems of surveillance is an awareness of how the presentation and representation of people, possessions and practices seems to be beyond any kind of centralized control – whether that would be a national government, a corporate entity or a single public relations manager. Mathiesen has his doubts about the empowering potential of the synopticon, considering its function to be largely that of silencing critical debate as it reduces public debate to whatever is deemed worthy to be shown on television, a media system which is (like all others) overdetermined by commercial interests. Although the current media ecology is perhaps more diverse and unruly than the one in Mathiesen's original account of synopticism, one has to consider the fact that much of people's mass self-communication takes place within the carefully policed boundaries of corporate networks and services. The terms of service of these and other media access providers tend to include warnings about posting or sharing information that is believed to be in violation of vaguely worded policies.

The freedom of (networks of) mass self-communication is not free at all. However, it can be productive, in that it produces alternate ways of seeing people, products and events. Concrete examples of productive synopticism – beyond the

consumptive realms of political news reports, celebrity shows or even reality television – are websites such as local business review site Yelp, or social reputation systems such as auction site eBay. People reviewing anything from products and travel destinations to all kinds of services offered by commercial and public institutions collectively provide a comprehensive look at what otherwise would constitute a rather overwhelming and impenetrable corporate or governmental arena. The reliability of such reviews as one's reputation score on eBay and other more or less similar services is produced by the sheer size and relative permanence of such websites. As reputation systems researcher Paul Resnick and his colleagues summarize, "Systems that rely on the participation of large numbers of individuals accumulate trust simply by operating effectively over time" (2000: 48). Individuals who thus, collectively and anonymously, look back indeed have power, in part evidenced in the eagerness of marketers to cater to those who actively engage in reviewing products and services online and offline – as in the case of carotmobbs, where people mob businesses that make the largest pledge towards sustainable practices and in doing so inspire media attention to be directed to the companies involved.²⁶ Synopticism can be a collaborative exercise in exerting power insofar as it signals the universal human capacity for moral norms. Through synoptic surveillance, communities of anonymous strangers not only can form long-lasting and well-functioning relationships, they also participate in the forming and policing of moral norms. Research in the field of computer-mediated communication indeed suggests that, when people are part of a company of strangers, they tend to orient themselves quite acutely to the social and situational norms of the group. In other words: both in and out of media life, people in crowds do not necessarily lose their identity – they tend to mutually construct, adopt and maintain a collective identity.

In the context of synopticism considered as a powerful tool for the collaborative policing of moral norms, and an overall

expectation for surveillance to act as a crime deterrent, it is important to note how since the 1990s the state has gradually ceded control of its surveillance mechanisms to private firms – in the United States as well as South Africa, China and the UK. In fact, many Western countries use private security contractors in international interventions – for example, in Afghanistan and Iraq. At the same time, residential areas in general, and gated communities in particular, outsource the policing of their enclaves to ‘armed response units’ and other security firms that monitor both private and public buildings, communities, shopping malls, public transport hubs (such as airports), and even military garrisons from afar generally using proprietary hardware and software. As Elke Krahmann (2010) carefully documents, the emergence of a global privatized security industry occurs largely beyond the scope of specific national or international rules and policies, and the number of people employed by such firms exceeds that of local, regional or national police officers by a ratio of at least two to one. In *Torture and democracy* (2009), Darius Rejali discusses how one of the consequences of this worldwide privatization of policing seems to be a form of more or less consensual use of torture, as generally unaccountable and unseen private security guards stand relatively unopposed when accosting, harassing and otherwise violently handling ordinary citizens. According to Rejali, this situation is not the result of war or a permissive legal environment, but rather gets produced by “informal arrangements among police, residents, and businesses to shape the urban landscape” (60). In other words, surveillance has been slowly but surely moving away from the all-seeing eye of the state and the police to the much more widespread and distributed gaze of the (private) many.

In a 2006 report based on consumer surveys and expert interviews worldwide, accounting and consultancy firm PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PWC) projects a vision of *Lifestyle Media* as the benchmark for lived experience in media. The

company's report defines lifestyle media as “the combination of a personalized media experience with a social context for participation,” requiring “two fundamental components: new content distribution models that put consumers in control, and more accurate and scalable data about what they are watching, doing, and creating.”²⁷ The PWC report is just one among countless others from competing consumer research and consultancy firms, most – if not all – of which tend to be premised on the potential of near-perfect tracking and profiling of people through their media use. Instead of reading this trend as the final nail in the coffin of advertising, marketing communications and public relations, such industry observers see all kinds of opportunities for new practices: ad-on-demand, personalized and targeted ads, consumer activity ads, viral ads – all of which presuppose that consumers want to be involved in the advertising process, whether through voluntarily submitting their personal information to a company in order to receive customized communications and services or by actively participating in the content of the ads.

The media industry's framing of a supposedly empowered (because co-creative) consumer is not without problems. Joseph Turow, for example, considers the construction of media users as chaotic, self-concerned and willingly contributing to a pervasive personal information economy as serving a strategic logic of marketing and advertising organizations “to present their activities not as privacy invasion but as two-way customer relationships, not as commercial intrusion but as pinpoint selling help for frenetic consumers in a troubling world” (2005: 120). Framing people as unruly and participatory media users furthermore allows industry professionals to aim at ‘taming’ the masses into statistically significant segments, lifestyle groups or subcultures. The primary function of advertising and marketing in this context would be to reduce their clients’ anxieties and lack of knowledge and imagination regarding the consumer. Perhaps all of us, in (social) media, ultimately act out those same deep anxieties, by mediating

ourselves in an attempt to reduce our uncertainty about who we are, what roles we are supposed to play, and how to engage the largely unknown and unseen people around us in a completely mediated runaway world. At the same time, much like the way the advertising industry necessitates its own existence, the notion of a more or less uncertain and unruly world 'out there' can be seen as a personalized construct providing each individual a motive to constantly monitor themselves and others in media – thus validating mutual surveillance and taking self-monitoring to a whole new level.

Beyond the panopticon

What must be clear is that different systems of surveillance in media life do not only impact the lives of people who are suspected of committing (or who are likely to commit) crime, or just those who have a political agenda or want to be represented in certain ways, or merely folks who shop a lot. In a media life, everyone is both subject and object of surveillance. It is in the ways we choose to act under such conditions of many and multiplying all-seeing mediated eyes that we can take responsibility for our actions and thus for the kind of society we want to live in. It is therefore striking that the overwhelming majority choose to actively participate in surveillance – everyone is spying on everyone else. Massive mutual monitoring is the backbone of social media, and consumes the majority of time people spend with media, informs the fundamental strategies of businesses across industry sectors, and inspires the management of many (if not most) relationships in contemporary society: between the state and its citizens, organized religion and its faithful, employers and employees, lovers and loved ones. Such intense mediated observation and, perhaps more importantly, the expectation thereof seems befitting an increasingly stretched sense of community – with family members and friends scattered around the world, with colleagues and competitors next door as well as on the other side of the planet,

with relationships and communal commitments engaged until further notice. As the principal components of contemporary lived experience – including but not limited to identity, space and place – are socially produced in media, it should come as no surprise that people use media to seek the counsel of others by observing how they live and, in a fascinating act of what biostatisticians Martin Nowak and Karl Sigmund label as “indirect reciprocity” and “third party altruism” (2005: 1291), massively put their own lives on display in return. As Danish digital media scholar Jakob Linde Jensen expresses it, “In a complicated society, everyone watches everyone and accountability and the monitoring of performance become important aspects of the policy-making process. We are already part of a mediated, political Omnipicon” (2007: 380). Jensen’s notion of *omnipicon* – where people live in a state of constant mutual surveillance – is considered by some a social system that democratizes the panopticon, and can thus neutralize centralized, top-down hierarchical forms of authority. Individuals are thus seen as empowered by the use of surveillance devices, such as wearable computers, personal cameras and cell phones, as people are now surveilling the surveillers, as well as surveilling each other.

On the other hand, one should be mindful of Jeremy Bentham’s original insight, that it is the *illusion of surveillance* that holds the key to managing an orderly society. Perhaps many of us do not necessarily share everything about ourselves. Research clearly shows that both young and old media users deploy increasingly sophisticated tactics to manage their privacy online, and that the vast majority of media users are at the very least aware of potential problems with living in public. But all of us expect or suspect we are being watched – by the state every time we enter a public space, by corporations whenever we shop, by employers at each instance of using the company’s networked technologies, and by the person or persons next to us as they most likely wield the same kind of surveillance devices as we do.

We have to recognize how in a media life every single individual is implicated in the maintenance of social order – but not exclusively nor necessarily in the service of consensual or otherwise communally governed relations of discipline. Today's perfect disciplinary institution does not run uninterrupted through society in some kind of generalized way, as Foucault suggested would be the case in the fulfillment of Bentham's original panoptic design. In a media life, the profiling machines Elmer signaled are not just the ubiquitous technologies of either panoptic or synoptic surveillance structuring the everyday experiences of citizen-consumers. In fact, each of us can be considered to be a profiling machine as we collectively hunt, gather, sort and archive data in order to expose our life and that of others to the world. Certainly, this way of living in media has profound productive potential for (self-)discipline, control and suspicion. On the other hand, the devices, messages, practices and values espoused in media are anything but uniform or uncontested. If one even moves a little bit beyond the relatively safe algorithmic waters of Google, Facebook and Wikipedia, the messiness of contemporary media is awe-inspiring. If we spend only a fraction of our time in mobile media linking up with the hundreds of people in our extended social networks, we would still be overwhelmed with the richness and diversity of human contact and communication. Perhaps Lars Qvortrup is right in assuming that hypercomplexity is not a problem, but rather a solution for the times we live in, and omnoptic surveillance is both the tool and collective practice we need ready-to-hand to see the world (and ourselves in it) the way people and things really are. Media *make* us real, because we *create* ourselves in media.

CHAPTER FIVE

Society in Media

where we live in media forever



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4 NO LIFE OUTSIDE MEDIA

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 5 <http://guerrillageography.blogspot.com>.
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 8 www.readwriteweb.com/archives/top_trends_of_2011_frictionless_sharing.php.
 9 See <https://www.teensurance.com>.
 10 Similar arguments are made in greater detail by authors such as Peter Weibel and Slavoj Žižek in the 2002 "CTRL [SPACE]" exhibition catalogue, published by MIT Press; see <http://ctrl-space.zkm.de/>.
 11 www.ucl.ac.uk/Bentham-Project/journal/cpwpan.htm.
 12 <http://cartome.org/panopticon2.htm>.
 13 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telescreen>.
 14 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1984_\(advertisement\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1984_(advertisement)).
 15 <http://cartome.org/panopticon2.htm>.
 16 danah boyd makes this comment in a blogpost for the Digital Media and Learning Research Hub at the University of California, Irvine, at <http://dmlcentral.net/blog/danah-boyd/public-default-private-when-necessary> (published on January 25, 2010).
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 19 As reported by *BBC News* on April 4, 2007: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/6524495.stm.
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 21 www.itu.int/osg/spu/publications/internetofthings.
 22 For these and other RFID and internet-of-things examples, see

science-fiction author Bruce Sterling's blog at *Wired*: www.wired.com/beyond_the_beyond/category/arphid-watch ("arphid" is a way to pronounce RFID).

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