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Wolfgang Sofsky: Privacy: A Manifesto

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1 TRACES

By the time Anton B. left the building in the morning, he'd already been recorded three times. His conversation with his parents had been saved on a telephone company computer. He entered the field of a surveillance camera in the hall the moment he stepped out the door of his apartment. As he was hurrying to the elevator with his four-year-old son, on the ground floor the doorman was going toward the revolving door. Holding one hand behind his back and fumbling with the top button of his blue uniform coat with the other, he smiled at B. and gave him a nod. Before he made his next round he straightened his tie and quickly wrote in his record book the time at which B. had left the building.

As B. drove toward the kindergarten, he noticed that the needle on the gas gauge was getting close to the red area. It looked as though new devices had been hung over several intersections during the night. Only at the gas station did B. still see the old video cameras. Now and then the cashier looked over at a little screen that never showed anything but cars, gas pumps, bored passengers, and customers moving around. As usual, B. paid for his gas with his credit card. On the receipt were listed not

only the gas but also the newspaper and a bag of licorice that B. handed to his boy, who was begging for the candy. When they got to the kindergarten a few blocks farther on, his son immediately ran happily into the big playroom where a clown's head was mounted on a swivel on the ceiling, its glass left eye peeping down at the room. If B. wanted to see what his son was doing he needed only to boot up the computer in his office.

B. turned on the car radio and put on his sunglasses. Because he was in a hurry, he floored the gas pedal and quickly turned onto the expressway. He had been driving this route for years and knew exactly where the radars were. So he was all the more surprised when he saw a flash as he drove up the on-ramp. Cursing, B. pounded on the steering wheel. Then he remembered that on the toll bridge all license numbers were filmed and compared with those of stolen cars. He didn't notice the infra-red flash on the pedestrian bridge. Even before he'd reached his company's underground garage, almost every instant of his existence in the public sphere had been recorded. He entered his office using a card with a computer chip that recorded his arrival time.

B. sat down at his desk and turned on his computer to look at his e-mails. Between the computer and the keyboard there was a little device that recorded all his keystrokes. Although B. was in a position of trust, a key-logger was installed on his machine as well. Employees were allowed to use the Internet, even for their own purposes, but they had to remember that everything they keyed in would be recorded. Most of them therefore voluntarily avoided using the company's computers for their

private correspondence. The inconspicuous device on the keyboard reminded everyone that, so far as possible, he should keep his secrets to himself.

During the lunch hour, B. got two calls. His tax adviser reported that tax officials had requested a statement regarding a foreign payment. B. was not aware of any irregularity. Apart from a few parking and speeding tickets, he'd never had any problem with the authorities. However, a year earlier he'd used his credit card to pay the bill at the hotel where he'd spent his vacation. The inquiry suggested that the tax man knew everything that happened in his bank account. Obviously some official had looked into his affairs without notifying him about it. B. felt a vague concern welling up inside him. He opened the window and looked down on the narrow street below. Music was being played softly over a loudspeaker. Now and then he could hear a strange buzz. It came from a tiny, almost invisible surveillance drone listening for suspicious noises in alleys and side streets.

The second telephone call was from his family doctor, who asked which data B. wanted to be recorded on the new health card. In order to make emergency care easier and decrease costs, the health insurance companies had recently begun to issue each patient a card with a computer chip, on which, along with identification information, all previous diagnoses, treatments, and prescriptions were registered along with an organ-donor agreement. The doctor advised B. to put only the required minimum of information on the card, a proposal that B. immediately accepted, even though he believed the trend toward complete digital records was ultimately unstoppable.

About 1:00 PM B. inquired about a train connection for his wife, who was visiting her parents. On the phone, his father-in-law promised him that he would not fail to get his daughter to the train station on time. B.'s company had expressly allowed private calls to be made on B.'s business phone. However, all area codes and numbers were recorded for the monthly telephone bill. In any case, the walls of the offices were so thin that they discouraged conversations that were too confidential or long-winded. B. had long since learned not to mention names when he was on the telephone. But it didn't take a genius to guess the names from the characteristic but inevitable expressions used in a conversation. Around 4:30 PM, he turned off his computer, put his things in his briefcase, stuck the card with the computer chip in the reader, and descended into the underground garage.

Video cameras in the corridor and in the elevator allowed the company's security guards to know who was currently in the building. On the expressway B. passed the toll bridge and the pedestrian bridge again before he parked his car in the supermarket lot. Right behind the entrance stood an inconspicuous device the size of a refrigerator, a backscatter X-ray machine that scanned every customer. The screen showed not only what one might be hiding under one's clothes or underwear; one's naked shape also was clearly recognizable. Although B. regularly bought food for the family on his way home and knew every corner of the store, on this particular day he walked helplessly up and down the aisles. At the cash register he hesitated to pull out his credit card. Credit cost him dear. Every time he bought something, his preferences,

whether he tried a new product, and how much money he probably could spend were all recorded.

At the train station guards in dark-blue uniforms checked all suitcases, backpacks, and handbags, sometimes cursorily, sometimes meticulously. The video cameras on the platforms were state-of-the-art. They had microphones and identification filters that triggered an alarm when they detected unusual movements or certain faces. After the recent incidents, railroad officials had hastily installed new devices. According to the official announcement, even the most experienced observer would have been unable to monitor thousands of passengers at the same time. Automatic comparison of the pictures with a photo and video databank, however, took only a millisecond. Using eyebrows, the distance between the eyes, the tip of the nose, and countless other physical characteristics, a suspicious face could immediately be spotted from any point of view. Neither glasses nor beards nor wigs could prevent identification. B. had read about all that in the newspaper. Nonetheless he wondered about a couple of uniformed guards who were no longer wandering around the waiting room, as they had done earlier, but were now standing conspicuously along the wall. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that at the end of a platform four guards had surrounded a young man. They were pushing him against a guardrail and searching him. Passersby paid little attention; a few looked the other way, and others pretended that they didn't see anything. One shouldn't get involved, people said, everything is all right. Minor arrests are arranged by the authorities.

On the way home, B. and his wife picked up their son at the kindergarten. When the family entered the apartment building, the staff had begun a new shift. The new doorman gave them a friendly smile and wrote down their arrival time. He glanced briefly at the monitor screen, and then went back to his crossword puzzle. B. hesitated for a moment. He found it almost impossible to go into the elevator; all of a sudden, it was as if he'd heard a voice that told him to wait. Only when he had closed the door to their apartment did he feel that he was no longer being observed.

After dinner he booted up his laptop and got on the Internet. Immediately he found himself again the object of attention. His Internet Service Provider recorded his activities. The Web sites he visited recorded his data. He had given his e-mail address to a newsgroup, and the auction site where he usually tried to complete his collection of antique toys had registered every one of his transactions over the past month and made them available to everyone who might be interested in them. Every ten minutes a window came up on his screen warning him that his virus definitions were out of date and needed to be updated immediately. Unknown Trojan horses might be collecting information on his computer. B. ordered two books from a bookstore that already had his credit card information. He checked the prices for digital cameras at three sites. His electronic mailbox contained several advertisements sent by companies he'd never heard of.

Before he went to bed, Anton B. spent a moment thinking over the events of the day. A brief malaise came over

him as he began to realize that he had not been alone for even a minute.



Most of our contemporaries are not aware that they are constantly being watched. Surveillance technology and the business of daily spying go on largely unnoticed. People have long since gotten used to video cameras, discount cards, and advertising messages. Some of it seems tedious, some of it inevitable, and much of it is invisible and unrecognized. Video cameras promise to provide security, registration services offer convenience. Although it occasionally annoys him, the transparent citizen appreciates how much easier life is in the computer age. He unhesitatingly foregoes being unobserved, anonymous, unavailable. He has no sense of having less personal freedom. He does not even see that there is something to be defended. He attaches too little importance to his private sphere to want to protect it at the expense of other advantages. Privacy is not a political program that can win votes. Protection of secrecy is not something that would be widely supported in societies with excruciatingly pervasive public spheres. The need to be left alone is not widespread. It is in profound contradiction with the spirit of the time, which sees everything as political and values being known over privacy. But the lack of protest and the feebleness of the defense do not mean that the danger is slight.

People leave more traces behind them than they realize. No longer is one allowed to withdraw from society and live without being pestered. The trail is so broad

that resourceful investigators can quickly determine where someone has been and with whom he has spoken. The individual cannot secretly change masks and become someone else. He can neither disguise himself nor temporarily disappear. His body is regularly X-rayed, his journey through life recorded, and his life changes documented. And the longer the data are stored, the less likely they will be forgotten. Archived knowledge is constantly growing. If necessary, any past event can be reconstructed. Nothing is overlooked, ignored, thrown away. Thus people are condemned to rely completely on themselves. They have to think about every trace they leave behind them, calculate in advance every consequence of their actions. When every careless act, every error, every fleeting trifle is recorded, there can no longer be any spontaneous action. Everything one does is evaluated and judged. Nothing escapes surveillance. The past suffocates the present, and no one dares to tackle the future anyway, because no one can take responsibility for every one of his preferences, for every time he is negligent or unreliable. If data were not erased at regular intervals, people would be imprisoned in the dungeons of their own history.

However, this outlook seems to frighten hardly anyone. Contemporary Western societies, it is said, are ruled by the law of change, of transience. Fashions come and go, acquaintances change, thoughts evanesce before they have even been worked out. Everywhere we find ourselves unwilling witnesses to empty discussions. The range, decibel level, and pace of communication have exploded.

Despite filtering programs, given the chaos of noise and images, no telescreen could reliably protect all suspicious traces. The primary concern is not private secrets but the public staging of oneself. According to the law of the media society, anyone who is not seen does not exist. What people fear is not that they will be observed but rather that no one will pay attention to them. Our contemporaries seem constantly to be busy clinging to images. Why should one be concerned about the video camera in the mall if one is hurrying from one snapshot to another and strikes a pose before every new background?

In the tumult of signs, some of our contemporaries resort to bizarre means to elicit respect and to leave some trace on the social memory. They pull out all the stops; their appeals are shrill and hysterical, their opinions abstruse and idiotic, their appearance strange and overdone. People want to appear on national television at any price, in order to display the banality of their lives before everyone's eyes. Once the spotlight is turned off, they melt unnoticed back into the crowd.

The vulgar quest for short-lived prominence is accelerating the destruction of privacy. The economy of attention makes people blind to the political danger. The yearning for personal significance has long since obliterated all sense of privacy. We therefore have no reason to regard the situation as one without danger. Worse yet, why bother with X-ray machines when people willingly expose themselves? Listening devices seem superfluous when one-on-one conversations constitute only a tiny fraction of communications, and when dialogue carried

on by telephone, telex, or Internet can be recorded at any time. Does everything have to be bugged and recorded if the mass of everyday conversation conceals only a void of meaninglessness? Not even video cameras will be necessary if everyone begins carrying an identity card that shows where he is at every moment.