

Culture of Surveillance

Write a coherent argument in which you support, qualify, or refute Staples' argument concerning surveillance and "tiny brothers."

We live in a culture of surveillance, one few of us can escape.

Our predicament is one of our own making.

Long before the National Security Agency took center stage, we were deploying ever more sophisticated ways of keeping a close watch on each other.

Often enhanced by the use of new information, visual, communication, and medical technologies, these surveillance strategies are not ushered in with dramatic displays of state power nor do they appear as challenges to constitutional democracy.

Rather, these are the quiet, seemingly innocuous techniques —what I call the "Tiny Brothers"—that appear in the workplace, the school, the community and the home.

Justified in the name of commerce, efficiency, safety, security, and governance, these are the mechanisms used by both public and private organizations and by the people who have authority over us to influence our choices and habits, closely monitor our performance, keep us in line, and gather knowledge about us.

For example:

- Most major employers engage in the electronic monitoring of workers, tracking their email, internet use, and whereabouts with GPS devices.
- School districts deploy Student Information Systems that help them collect minute details of a student's performance, attendance, and behavior that is made available to administrators and parents in real-time over the web.
- Parents purchase inexpensive hair testing kits to tell if their kids are using drugs and track their college-age offspring's whereabouts through their cell phones.
- Police cars scan and store millions of license plate numbers and in many cities, public buses have sophisticated audio listening systems. Even small communities bristle with surveillance cameras.
- Corporations' data mine the books we read and the music we listen to for clues about how to pitch ads to us.

Add to these the numerous other "data sponges" we encounter in our daily lives and it's clear that our actions and behaviors are being systematically noted. In this sense, "mass surveillance" arrived some time ago.

We exhibit what Marshall McLuhan once called "narcissus narcosis," a self-hypnotic syndrome in which we are oblivious to how new technologies are invading and changing every aspect of our lives. Unless we confront the pervasive and pernicious effects of the Tiny Brothers, we will continue to undermine our individual autonomy, privacy, and human dignity and further deepen our culture of surveillance.

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