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Pervasive Surveillance, Total Exposure and the End of Privacy

By Greg Guma

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More than a year before 9/11 a blue-ribbon congressional commission on terrorism released a series of recommendations that made civil libertarians cringe. To prevent possible terrorist attacks, said the panel (which included a former CIA director) restrictions on wiretapping should be loosened and surveillance of foreign students should be increased.

At the time, even the conservative Lincoln Legal Foundation labeled the cure “worse than the disease,” arguing that such threats didn’t warrant a suspension of constitutional rights. Most people barely noticed the dispute, however, and even if they had, it’s unlikely that many would have expressed concern about the implications of more wiretapping or spying on people accused of no crimes. The problem was terrorism, after all.

Since then, despite the American preoccupation with individual privacy, surveillance of everyday life has become so pervasive that it’s difficult to resist the mounting intrusions. Video cameras perch around banks, airports, hospitals, ATMs, stores, freeways, and building lobbies and elevators. The Transportation Security Agency recently announced that it will expand its own “stop and frisk” domain to cover trains, buses and concerts.

People often feel safer with cameras observing local streets and parking lots. There are complaints about Facebook’s collection of data, and some consumers do object to the collection of information on their shopping preferences by websites and stores. Still, most accept it as an acceptable and relatively harmless trade-off.

According to Bill Gates (who should know), computers will soon be able to inexpensively scan massive video records to find a particular person or activity. In his 1995 book, *The Road Ahead*, Gates already envisioned (but didn't directly recommend) a camera on every streetlight. "What today seems like digital Big Brother might one day become the norm if the alternative is being left to the mercy of terrorists or criminals," he wrote. Millions will choose to lead "a documented life," Gates predicted, keeping an audio, written, or video record of their everyday activities.

Once considered a threatening intrusion, surveillance has also become a form of entertainment. Using the Internet, millions proudly put their images and private lives online. Thousands line up to be watched 24/7 by cameras and TV audiences. On "reality" TV shows the contestants willingly surrender their privacy in the hope of winning fame or fortune. Although those shows occasionally provide insights into group behavior, they primarily promote voyeurism while indirectly undermining objections to other forms of surveillance.

In the past, concerns about privacy centered on the government's activities. The Fourth Amendment to the US Constitution provided protection against "unreasonable searches and seizures" by the State, and US Supreme Court rulings have suggested that there may be a constitutional right to privacy from government invasions. But there is little protection from the new technologies, and the dramatic expansion of private surveillance, along with a public embrace of "big brother" to guard against crime or provide amusement, make it harder to establish meaningful restrictions.

The largest problem may not be conventional surveillance — a bugging device installed with a warrant, or a cop with a camera — but rather the indiscriminate use of video and other tools, along with the implications for manipulation of human behavior. People who know they are, or may be, watched end up acting differently. Through a combination of design and commercial accident, businesses are grafting surveillance to Skinnerian theory to create a powerful new form of conditioning.

In the name of efficiency, employers use cameras and tracking programs to monitor and mold employees. In the name of entertainment, TV puts people in a competitive goldfish bowl, promoting the idea that being totally exposed is a privilege and, with "winning" — not necessarily good — behavior, can lead to financial reward or at least celebrity.

For people already suffering from narcissism — a growing social epidemic with symptoms including addiction to vicarious, mediated experiences, fear of dependence and aging, and unsatisfied cravings — a life of total exposure can become a prescription for more alienation and a cynical detachment from reality. Traditionally, the narcissist has been defined narrowly as someone who relates only to his or her own image. However, a more contemporary definition would also incorporate the characteristics mentioned above, as well as dependence on the warmth provided by others, a sense of inner emptiness, and boundless repressed rage.

Narcissists can be pseudo-intellectuals or calculating seducers. Often, they are also fascinated with celebrities. Yet, even though such frustrated climbers tend to seek out the famous, they are frequently compelled to destroy their fantasy figures.

If this was merely a description of a few "sick" individuals we might find some comfort. But patterns of narcissism affect millions and are reinforced daily. Perhaps most disquieting, the narcissistic personality is ideally suited for positions of power.

Selling oneself has become a major form of work in our mediated world, and success often rests on the ability to project “personality” and/or an attractive image. Self-promotion also meshes neatly with an idealization of powerful personalities who represent what the narcissist seeks. Narcissists identify with winners out of their fear of being losers. Objects of hero worship tend to give meaning to the otherwise unanchored lives of society’s many emotional casualties.

Yet mixed with idealization is an urge to degrade the object of admiration, sparked when the narcissist’s hero ultimately disappoints. This desperate urge, intensified by the machinery of mass promotion, can turn even assassination into a form of spectacle.

Until very recently, the fact that the intelligence agencies of the US, England, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand operate a system of satellites and computers that can monitor almost all of the world’s electronic communications barely registered as a problem. After all, we’re all being watched anyway. The more “spying” we learn about, or participate in, the less unusual it seems to become.

Being watched almost constantly may provide a superficial sense of security, and watching others may be titillating and fun. The trouble is that it also undermines the impulse to act authentically, while numbing both the watcher and watched to the hidden threats posed to freedom and healthy development.