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Consumer Technology after Surveillance Theory

Richard Rogers and Sabine Niederer

Picture a prison from a Hollywood film, with long lanes of adjacent cells full of prisoners. The prisoners are shouting, and smashing their dinner trays against the bars. But then, the Nokia ringtone pierces the corridor. The guard checks his pockets, but his phone isn't ringing. All prisoners simultaneously reach into their overalls, and one pulls out a ringing phone. The idea of prisoners being called by their friends on the outside or even fellow prisoners might be shocking. They would appear to be completely out of control.

Apart from the consumer-prisoner sketched above, affix the word consumer to the otherwise disciplined, and consider some events of the recent past. The consumer-soldier provided the Abu Ghraib torture shots, for example. The consumer-worker writes a blog that criticizes his company. And the consumer-student uses his own laptop with GPRS, avoiding the university server.

In other words, the Foucauldian subjects of surveillance now own and use consumer technology, which makes them unruly. Foucault described how surveillance disciplined people in enclosed spaces – the prison, the barracks, the hospital, the factory, the school. Design and techniques (the institution's daily 'regime') eventually made bodies docile. In the 18th and 19th century, the periods Foucault analysed in his well-known work *Discipline and Punish*, people will have had consumer technology, or objects foreign to the institutional regime. So far, however, the *objects* carried by the *subjects* hardly have been considered.

Does surveillance theory currently account for the consumer-prisoner, consumer-soldier, consumer-patient, consumer-worker and consumer-student? It does account for the consumer, at least. According to surveillance theory after Foucault, consumers are enticed into participating in being watched in exchange for product, as Poster and Elmer write. Click-and-buy has an in between step, however, where it is noted which information is collected on you. University of Amsterdam new media student Michael Stevenson sums it all up in the idea of the "whatever button." Click through the various buttons, and you will receive the product. To the interactions in between,

you'll say, "whatever." There is a sense of docility and perhaps futility in Stevenson's notion, which surveillance theorists keep in mind, too. To participate in consumer society, you have to be watched. It's not so much that resistance is futile. It's more that you wouldn't if you could. "Whatever."

Click-and-buy has one of its finer moments in the patented 'one-click' system by Amazon, which frees the consumer from the "whatever" step. To be able to consume product the fastest, in a single click, you must have all your data pre-filled, well formed and fresh. Thomas Elsaesser has suggested that our databody – the set of personal details that grants us access to product – must remain well groomed, so as to get it ready for the day, like brushing one's teeth in the morning.

Theorists and consumers alike are already familiar with consuming at pace. For some time now, surveillance has allowed the docile to consume not product but space, as through airports to the next remote comfort lounge, Castells writes. Docile bodies moving quickly is an unfamiliar image, for we are more accustomed to the Orwellian motion pictures – hordes of the similarly clad ambulating like sleep-walkers, whether in factory outfits or in late 1940s business suits, hats and shoes. Surveillance and disciplining regimes once drained energy, and slowed commerce. To resist, factory workers would 'pace' themselves, and perhaps strike. Surveillance used to slow money and people down. Nowadays, it speeds things up.

As with Orwell in *1984*, the most highly surveilled remain the 'kinetic elite,' able to consume dedicated flow space by passing quickly through gateways. The lesser surveilled wait in line, sadly, for economy class check-in, with too much luggage. They hurry up and wait, caught repeatedly by Deleuzian fencing. Deleuze took issue with Foucault, saying that the password society has overtaken the panoptic. Surveillance no longer reforms bodies, but rather grants physical access. Passing swiftly are those with databodies in good shape. As Peter Adey writes, waiting at customs at Schiphol Airport and watching businessmen arch their necks for the eye-scanner is a Deleuzian moment by Privium.

To theorists, artists, activists and NGOs, awareness may bring change. We should know how much we participate in the surveillance society, and that not possessing the Albert Heijn supermarket's loyalty card is the equivalent in surveillance thought to being punished (pay more). To raise consumer consciousness, Stevenson proposes that the Albert Heijn supermarkets install an additional viewing screen. As soon as

the loyalty card is scanned and you're awarded with your discounted items, you also see the dynamic back-end, or what Lev Manovich has called new media: capture, store, interface, search. Perhaps consumers would like to see their shopper-profiles when they check out. Corporate research departments also scout awareness-raising projects. It is in this context that Eric Kluitenberg calls artist-designer projects accidental, unpaid beta testing.

Another strategy for dealing with the surveillance society lies in databody self-help. The aware and profiled consumer may try to reassert his idiosyncrasy, becoming less like consumer shop-alikes, and more a unique, special individual. "I want to be me, not them," the shopper may say, looking at the profiling machine with back-end transparent. "Can I escape from this particular rendering of myself? Can I recompile my *datasef*?" First, here's a poignant example of how the self is taken over by data capture, storage, algorithm, and recommendation, and how the consumer tries to reassert himself through interactions with his TV and digital video recorder.

In 2002, the Wall Street Journal wrote:

Mr. Iwanyk, 32 years old, first suspected that his TiVo thought he was gay, since it inexplicably kept recording programs with gay themes. A film studio executive in Los Angeles and the self-described "straightest guy on earth," he tried to tame TiVo's gay fixation by recording war movies and other "guy stuff."

"The problem was, I overcompensated," he says. "It started giving me documentaries on Joseph Goebbels and Adolf Eichmann. It stopped thinking I was gay and decided I was a crazy guy reminiscing about the Third Reich."

Of course the user may not like what a machine has captured, stored and algorithmically recommended. Subsequently, he tries to make his databody cooperate with his current preferences, so as to improve his future profile. (There is yourself, and a simulation of a future self, as Bogard writes.) The question concerns whether consumer technology will allow him to re-establish himself. For example, can he clear his history? Previously expressed preferences may cast unwanted shadows on the future.

The larger question concerning consumer technology has to do with whether it needs to know about you in order for you to consume it. This is familiar ground. To

consume space, no longer can you be anonymous, like Benjamin's *flâneur* once was. The *flâneur* was able to blend into the urban crowd. Up until the 1950s one could board an ocean liner, and disappear. Board an airplane these days and you re-appear. The current impossibility of anonymous movement has been captured in the notion of the 'disappearance of disappearance,' as Haggerty and Ericson put it.

The disappearance of disappearance is evident in the consumer city, as the *flâneur* and the anonymous shopper are on the verge of extinction. Moreover, in consuming product, as opposed to space, surveillance is no longer limited to the (kinetic) elite. Everyday people, the under-surveilled progs in Orwell's terms, or the data-challenged queued up in airports in Deleuzian language, are increasingly the subjects of surveillance. The question remains whether the unruly consumer-prisoner, consumer-soldier, consumer-patient, consumer-worker and consumer-student are using products without surveillance built in. Which consumer technology is still available without it? (Consider buying professional grade technology, and set mode to manual.)

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