Digital Dystopia


In 2015, the National Security Agency is apparently intercepting and storing well over 1.7 billion emails, phone calls and other communications every day. The NSA’s approach, an internal memo produced for a gathering of “Five Eyes” peers (the intelligence agencies of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom) indicated, is to “collect it all,” “process it all,” “exploit it all,” “partner it all,” “sniff it all,” and ultimately, “know it all.” Former NSA director Michael Hayden has acknowledged, “We kill people based on metadata.”

As Bernard Harcourt, a professor of law at Columbia University and the École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris, points out, the “surveillance state” is not the only entity tracking and piecing together our digital identities and activities. As governments manipulate us politically, corporations are using social media to turn us into “malleable subjects who, willingly or unwittingly, allow ourselves to be nudged recommended, tracked, diagnosed, and predicted...” The data brokerage market, which reported $156 billion in revenue in 2012, includes Medbase200, which offered to sell a list of “rape sufferers” to pharmaceutical companies for $79 for each 1,000 names.

We ought to be scared, appalled, and angry about the loss of privacy and anonymity. Instead, Harcourt claims in Exposed, his dystopic indictment of our digital condition, many of us give ourselves away and reveal our innermost thoughts “willingly, enthusiastically and with all our passion,” on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Tumblr, Google searchers, online shopping, texts to loved ones, and personal web sites. Clairvoyant about many things, especially the technology and pervasiveness of surveillance, he writes, George Orwell was dead wrong about one feature of the future in his classic novel 1984. The principal strategy of oppression, Orwell indicated, “was to crush and eradicate desire” and fill the men and women of Oceania with hate. The digital world, it turns out, is awash in “likes,” “shares,” “favorites,” “friending,” and “following.” It is far easier to tame people, young and old, by indulging desires, interests, and lusts (especially for simple things like lattes, frappes, free Wi-Fi, and sex) rather than quashing them.

For his critique of the digital world, Harcourt rounds up the usual suspects - capitalism, consumption, Disneyfication, McDonaldization, and the surveillance state; the customary lines between politics, economics and society, he maintains, are melding into one gigantic leviathan, with a shared data market permitting those in power to “watch, surveil, detect, predict, and, for some, punish.” He relies heavily on French theorists, especially Michel Foucault, who described the panopticon society, the disciplinary society, and the punitive society, and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who tried to replace psychoanalysis with "schizoanalysis," a material psychology designed to show that "desire can be made to desire its own repression.

In the twenty-first century, Harcourt asserts, with the passion, sense of urgency, and, at times, hyperbole, that pervades his book, "we have become, slowly but surely, slaves" to digital spaces, virtual experiences, and electronic gadgets. With society as a whole "becoming a totalizing institution," and the erosion of once prized "analog values" (privacy, some autonomy, dignity, a room of one own, the right to be let alone), he can imagine "a time in the not too distant future when there will be no need to incarcerate because we will all be watched too
By documenting the nature and extent of “digital transparence,” Harcourt does shake us up. He concludes with recommendations for resistance to data-mining, collection, and profiling. His role models, not surprisingly, are Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, a secure location where whistle-blowers can upload material they believe the public should see, and Edward Snowden, who leaked hundreds of thousands of classified NSA documents. And Harcourt identifies websites that assist users to encrypt more effectively, create their own personal management systems, assemble secure servers, establish shell accounts, lie about personal information, limit the exposure of information, and join peaceful protest movements.

Clearly it won’t be easy. Since many Americans accept “intelligence gathering” as essential to protecting national security, “the cost of truth-telling has gone up.” The measures Harcourt recommends, moreover, may “fend off the first or second layer of surveillance” -- voyeurs, advertisers, and amateur hackers -- but not necessarily the NSA, FBI, or large multi-nationals. Nor does Harcourt's support of “leaderless resistance” (akin to Occupy Wall Street) to overcome modern day democratic apathy inspire confidence.

Franz Kafka, and not George Orwell, Harcourt suggests, may provide the best lens through which to view our digital condition. Although some will claim that he ignores the upside of digital technology and exaggerates the false consciousness of Americans, he may be right. In any event, limiting the reach and the power of corporate and government leviathans to preserve some level of privacy and autonomy will require ingenuity, courage and collective action.

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