

Orwell That Ends Well

by Randall Amster via fleet - CommonDreams *Wednesday, Sep 8 2010, 6:58am*
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In just the past week, a friend lost his cellphone, and another was robbed. One fell asleep in the bathtub, and another visited her old elementary school. A number had interesting fare for dinner. Some liked the weather, others lamented it. One notable presence in particular diligently posted her whereabouts at all times. Pretty typical stuff actually, and almost none of it interesting in the least.

This isn't the Information Age - it's the Too Much Information Age. Everyone is posting their diaries, dalliances, likes, and longings because they have an audience of "friends" who border on being voyeurs. Disconcertingly, there's no compulsion to participate in this apart from peer pressure, which is apparently a powerful motivator even well beyond one's high school years.

And this is precisely the genius of the Self-Surveilling Society in which we find ourselves: it taps into the psychology of our teen years (to know and be known) and exports it to the world writ large. In this lexicon, your friends become (as in high school) your style-setters, sounding boards, commiserators, gossip sources, reality checkers, and existential validators. If you do something and don't share it, did it really happen?

Today, your friends and acquaintances can "tag" you wherever you go. Photos from every social gathering will appear online almost instantaneously with your name attached to them (so please, dress nicely and try not to eat on camera). Someone you know can log your whereabouts and transmit them for others to see, ostensibly creating a record of your movement patterns. What you purchase, consume, read, and desire can all be compiled with your willing participation.

In those bygone days of a decade or so ago, this much information on an individual could only be obtained with a search warrant and/or through close (and costly) surveillance. To compel the disclosure of a person's diary (and thus innermost thoughts) required meeting a high legal standard. Continually monitoring one's location, getting their acquaintances to divulge information, and mapping out their circle of friends and allies was an exacting task of espionage.

Now it's all out there, sans warrant and with no KGB agents required. In just a few short years of going digital, the entire balance of privacy has been inverted from a matter of personal integrity to societal necessity. Our electronic communications are all fair game for prying eyes, the phones we use have tracking devices in them, and our financial purchases are logged and data-mined. Yet even these devices are old school, since now people want all of this information (and more) to be widely known.

The justifications for this trend are interesting in themselves. "Well, they know about everything we do anyway, so what's the difference?" "I have nothing to hide; my life is an open book." "At least now I can take some ownership of how my public profile looks." "It's all in good fun!" The overarching theme seems to be a combination of rationalization, resignation, and exhibitionism.

But there's another aspect to this phenomenon, and it's right out of high school: people want to be liked. Literally, now that your friends can validate your musings by digitally liking them, sharing

them, and - most importantly - letting you know that they are paying attention to the minutia of your life. In this sense, everyone becomes a beacon of "news" unto themselves, and your "feed" will seamlessly integrate items ranging from the cost of war to the cost of dinner.

It's an ingenious methodology that fits the tenor of these egocentric times. The inexorable construction of the "rational individual" in Western society finds its fullest expression in the implications of social networking media. Using the data that is willingly provided, a marketing campaign is being launched right now just for you. You matter! You are the news of the day. You are a trendsetter and an opinion-shaper. You, my friends, are cool.

And in this, perhaps, lies a strange democratic potential of sorts. Why shouldn't the news and views supplied by Random Friend be equivalent to that from CNN? Celebrity gossip and reality TV are passé; now everyone's a celebrity and our lives are constantly being broadcast. Some folks use this platform to launch self-taught journalistic endeavors. Others create digital footprints that are an art form in themselves. A few stand out as masters of the pithy retort. Some are incredible news-sifters and media mavens. Given that the technology is still in its infancy, it may well be that we're witnessing a potential evolution of humankind.

Yet it still remains firmly within the box crafted by hegemonic forces. You can move about the cabin as much as you like (as long as we know where you are), and you can have the illusion of creative autonomy within its confines - but do not approach the walls or seek an exit. We can learn to enjoy our captivity because our friends are all there, and there's enough going on to keep us distracted for the foreseeable future. It may be a prison of sorts, but it's one we're choosing - and anyway, it's better than the alternative of being "free" but having no one notice.

So what if once in a while it gets a little stifling, or if it turns out that you like most of your friends better through the medium of a microchip than you do in real life. Does it really matter if stalkers, predators, or people in drab suits know your whereabouts at all times? Who cares if corporations know your habits and tastes better than you do? Your life is an open book and, at the end of the day, what matters most is that someone is reading it.

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