

SPIES LIKE US



IN OUR WIRELESS WORLD, YOU NEVER KNOW WHEN,
WHERE OR HOW YOUR MUG MIGHT SHOW UP
IN A VERY PUBLIC ONLINE SPHERE. **WHO NEEDS
BIG BROTHER WHEN YOU'VE GOT A
CULTURE HOOKED ON THE DIGITAL AGE?**

BY TOWN TRAVIS

It's your bachelor party and you're having the time of your life—throwing back tequila shots with your buddies and stuffing dollar bills in the string-bikini bottoms of top-heavy pole dancers. You're thinking, "It doesn't get any better than this." You're having such a good time that you don't pay much attention to the group of guys sitting next to your table, drinking and talking, some of them yapping animatedly on their cell phones. A few days later your fiancée shoves her laptop in your face. It's a YouTube video of...you, getting an alarmingly intimate lap dance. Not good. It turns out, one of those dudes from the neighboring table decided to upload the camera phone videos from his dirty Vegas vacation. Looks like your wedding might be on hold.

Welcome to the new Panopticon. You never know who's watching, and there's nothing you can do about it. Jeremy Bentham first conceived the Panopticon model in 1785 as a prison design. The original concept was a circular array of prison cells surrounding a central guard tower. The idea was that

the prisoners would never know if guards were actually present in the tower, but the mere idea that they *might* be watching would serve as a controlling power—pretty creepy. In society, Panopticon is Big Brother's dream come true, says scientist and futurist David Brin. "Everybody but the Party Elite becomes a prisoner, scrutinized from above by a permanent aristocracy that can never be held accountable."

Futurist Jamais Cascio writes that our experiences and memories will be (and are already) recorded and archived—by our own volition. Instead of hiding from Big Brother's panoptic gaze, we happily perform before a billion shiny telescreens of camera phones. Then, as true exhibitionists, we upload the results to YouTube and Facebook.

IN RECENT YEARS the model has shifted to become what Cascio calls the Participatory Panopticon. Instead of one Big Brother watching, millions of camera-wielding "Little Brothers" will monitor one another. Surveillance is done by civilians, by

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HILLSTROM'S TRIP THROUGH A MODERN-
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THE BIRTH OF PANOPTICON

WHY ONE MAN BELIEVED STRATEGIC ARCHITECTURE WAS ENOUGH TO KEEP THE DREGS OF SOCIETY IN LINE

The Panopticon model was first conceived by an eccentric social philosopher in the late 18th century. Jeremy Bentham proposed “a simple idea in architecture” describing “a

new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in quantity hitherto without example.” This mode played with visibility and invisibility, employing an “Inspector” that cannot be seen by inmates and cells that render prisoners totally visible to his gaze. Prisoners don’t know when they are being observed and the idea of an invisible omnipresence keeps everyone in line.

The ultimate goal is that at some point, you don’t even need an actual person to observe—you perpetuate the fiction. The Inspector communicates with prisoners in their cells by a more ominous version of the paper-cup-on-a-string, using “conversation tubes.”

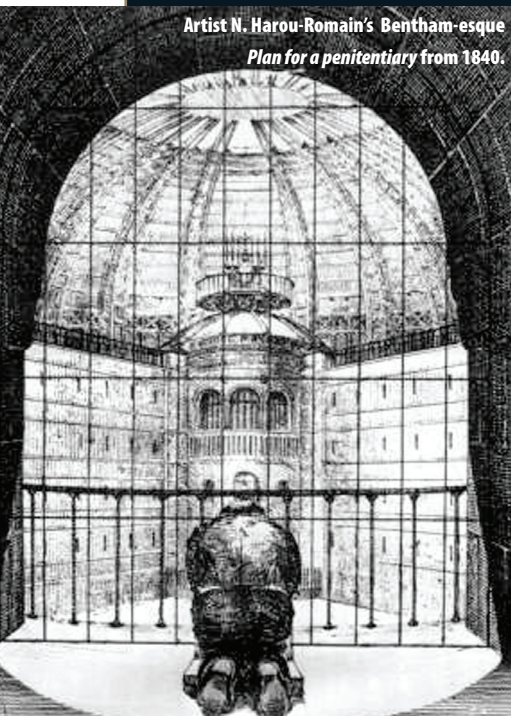
He issues commands, instructions, and warnings to prisoners without leaving the tower. Quite mundanely, though, his other task is bookkeeping. Since the Inspector must use a lantern while he works, the prisoners can see his silhouette cast by the light. He becomes just a sinister dark spot, casting his gaze in all directions. And when he’s not there, any

inanimate object placed in front of the lamp will serve as the dark spot watching over hundreds of inmates.

But doesn’t some authority figure have to make a scene if the rules are broken? Presumably, prisoners can venture serious infractions with the knowledge that no one’s watching. But Bentham has a contingency plan: Single out one of the worst-behaved inmates and allow him a couple of minor offenses: “I will watch until I observe a transgression. I will minute it down. I will wait for another: I will note that down too. I will lie by for a whole day; he shall do as he pleases that day ... The next day I produce a list to him – You thought yourself undiscovered: You abused my indulgence: See how you were mistaken.” Everyone will come to believe that someone somewhere is banking their every move.

Although Bentham’s idea never quite took root in his own time, a slew of prisons scattered around the world now have “Round Houses” that mimic his scheme.

—CHRISTA HILLSTROM



Artist N. Harou-Romain's Bentham-esque Plan for a penitentiary from 1840.

choice, instead of being imposed by governments. While the Panopticon is top-down surveillance, the Participatory Panopticon is bottom-up, or “sousveillance,” as Cascio describes it—meaning, watching from below. “Sure, that makes little difference in a true prison,” Brin says. “But in any sort of society, if all the leaders are exposed to scrutiny from the public, it is sure to put limits on the harm the leaders can do to the public.” The trend to document everything is led by the increasing availability of cheap and easy-to-use camera phones and the availability of wireless Internet, which allows

people to instantly upload photos or videos. Wikipedia—a perfect example of Panopticism because of its user-submitted content—defines the Participatory Panopticon as “the proliferation of photographic and video content accessible through the Internet to the point that it can be utilized as an up-to-date, authoritative source on all human activities.” Brin says that in a truly transparent society, people are motivated to monitor those in power by a sense of responsibility. “Under those circumstances,” he says, “free citizens would probably choose to vote themselves a few small zones of

genuine privacy—the bedroom, the home, intimate conversations. Even so, life may not be perfect. There is always the possibility that instead of Big Brother we’d have a billion or two ‘Little Brothers’ as 51 percent oppresses the rest.”

BUT THE PARTICIPATORY Panopticon lacks social responsibility. Within it, transparency is merely a byproduct resulting from people’s access to recording and archiving technology. “What it is doing is making active social responsibility easier, but not in any way pushing it,” Cascio says.

“People will use [panoptic technologies] in superficial kinds of ways.” Consider the CW’s mega hit drama, “Gossip Girl,” created around an anonymous high school girl who sends out text messages en masse to her snooty New York City classmates, revealing the scandalous and dastardly deeds of everyone they know. She gets the goods via text messages and camera phone pictures.

DESPITE THE LACK of social responsibility in a panoptic society, constant bottom-up sousveillance can create social change—and not just by accident. In the 2004 presidential election, a website called Video Vote Vigil asked citizens to monitor polling places. And in 2005, UK newspaper *The Guardian* called on citizens to become vigilante journalists, using cell phones and digital cameras to monitor an underexposed Tony Blair. “We’ll see both public and private figures begin to behave as if anything could be recorded,” Cascio says. This means that everyone, not only those in power, must assume his or her every action is being recorded, even if no cameras are evident.

PANOPTIC TECHNOLOGY IS already infused in daily lives. Many cell phones are traceable, and everything we do on the Internet can be monitored and recorded. It allows multiple layers of observation—everyone can observe everyone else, but no one knows who is the observer and who is the observed. Unlike Bentham’s Panopticon structure, the Internet allows all users to disseminate information, not just those in power. “Most mobile phones support live streaming video, so you can, in principle, be transmitting video from your phone to the Internet,” Cascio says. “These phones are not limited to the Generation Y/Millen-

nial crowd. They have the potential of becoming a practice space for exhibitionism.”

Facebook provides a map of social networks, showing how “friends” are connected to each other. Only those that refuse to participate will be free from observation, but still at risk because friends and family may use it. “If you’re not on Facebook, if you’re not on Twitter, it’s not just that you’re invisible, it’s that you’re out of the loop,” Cascio says. “It’s not just that people can’t see you, it’s that you can’t see them.” It and other tools have become the media upon which bottom-up surveillance is expressed. If you were to upload a video from a mobile phone, it would show up on half a dozen other sites and spread all over the web. “Technologies are enablers for that behavior,” Cascio says.

WHILE THE PARTICIPATORY Panopticon is essentially benign, it has an evil sibling that Cascio calls the Participatory Decepticon. No, it’s not a Transformer, but rather the bastard child of the old Panopticon model and photo and video manipulation software. The Decepticon is what happens when the public can access recording technology and editing software, i.e. Photoshop. It’s becoming easier to manipulate photos and video and make them seem authentic. So far, no technology seems immune to it.

Sometimes people manipulate information just for fun—just think of all those e-mails that made the rounds, depicting Sarah Palin’s head on a rifle-toting bikini model body. “Griefing” is an Internet term that Cascio defines as prank-fueled manipulation of content. And while the initial incident is often speedily quelled, the aftermath can be detrimental. If a video of the president is manipulated to make

him appear anti-American, some people will always believe it to be authentic. “There’s a group of people who never hear the correction,” Cascio says. “If we have a lot of stuff like that appearing, we’ll have a lot of people beginning to distrust anything recorded.”

Technologies such as Digg track anything you post online, along with your demographics and how others react to your posts. MySpace and Facebook can list users by a massive array of demographic and psychographic information. Search

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for “Panopticon” on Flickr and it will indicate the most popular photo in that category, as rated by users.

Despite our rampant exhibitionism, we still prefer technologies that allow some control. “People do still value privacy in the Twitter world,” says Brad Templeton, chairman of the Electronic Frontier Foundation. “They still care a lot if the wrong people learn stuff or use it wrong; they just are saying they are not bothered when the right people do things.”

As the Participatory Panopticon becomes more infused in our daily lives, the benefits and risks of documenting and observing nearly every instance must be weighed in order to maintain our basic rights and our perception of who we are. **Q**