

John Twelve Hawks: “New surveillance states have placed us in an invisible prison”

Surveillance

The continuing revelations by Edward Snowden have convinced many of us that we are living in a modern surveillance state. And the problem isn't just the activities of the National Security Agency and Great Britain's GCHQ. “Trickle Down Surveillance” has provided spy technology to small town police officers and developing world dictators. In addition, our activities are monitored for commercial reasons by a wide variety of international corporations (Amazon isn't the “Everything Store,” it's the “Find Out Everything About You” store).

Anyone who steps back for a minute and observes our modern digital world might conclude that we have destroyed our privacy in exchange for convenience and false security. That private world within our thoughts has been monitored, tabulated and quantified. Our tastes, our opinions, our needs and our desires have been packaged and sold as commodities. Those in power have pushed their need for control one step too far. They turned unique individuals into data files, and our most intimate actions have become algorithmic probabilities.

The destruction of personal privacy is not an ideological issue. Thoughtful women and men on every point of the political spectrum are beginning to realize that surveillance technology has shifted the balance of power between institutions and individuals. Without private thoughts and actions we can never truly be free.

Ten years ago, I believed that individuals could live off the grid, but because of “trickle-down surveillance,” it's becoming impossible to escape surveillance in a rural area or in a developing country. Most of the people reading this essay have jobs that involve computers. We have cellphones, and we use the Internet. Like it or not, we're living in a digital infrastructure.

Although I write dystopian fiction, I don't believe in dystopian fantasies. Unless some future hacker genius creates a virus that wipes every database clean, it's clear that destroying one small part of this Virtual Panopticon is not going to bring the walls down.

So what are we supposed to do? How can we avoid becoming just another bar-coded object tracked within a World of Things?

A place of refuge

A good first step is to find or create an occasional place of refuge where you can escape the electronic grid that surrounds us. It's a place without phones or computers — without monitoring of any kind. Stepping back from the grid is especially important if you have small children. They need to discover the possibilities created by their own imaginations.

I realize that switching off one's Twitter feed is highly difficult for some people. But walking alone down a forest path, smelling the wet earth, and watching branches sway in the wind is actually the first step in your act of resistance.

You can't truly hear your own voice until the shouting around you disappears. New ideas and possibilities — our *own* ideas, our *own* possibilities — will occur only when we step away from the Virtual Panopticon.

At various times of my life I have turned away from our high-tech society. When I was younger I simply camped or explored the wilderness on my own. During the last few years, I've experienced more extreme periods of isolation in Nepal and Tibet (in both of these countries, people are more accepting of these kinds of actions).

The last time I stepped off the grid, I took photographs of myself before and after the experience. On the first day, my face showed the conventional "mask" we all create to protect our private Self. Thirty-one days later, I had grown a beard, but that was an insignificant change. I was smiling. My eyes were wide open and ready to see the beauty of our world.

One consequence of living — even for a short time — in a place of refuge is that when you return to your daily routine, you'll be more aware of the ways that the Panopticon is watching you and predicting your behavior. This awareness gives you the motivation to gradually create a parallel life.

One Man Standing in the Middle of a Street

The key image of our era is not an astronaut on the moon or a smirking billionaire holding a new smartphone. I'm continually inspired by the 1989 video of a man standing in front of a column of tanks one day after the Chinese military massacred the pro-democracy protesters who had gathered in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

When the lead tank tries to drive around this protester, he repeatedly steps into its path. The driver of the lead tank shouts at him. The column starts to move, but the lone protester stops them once again. I don't know this hero's name and I don't know what happened to him, but I'm still inspired by his bravery. The Tank Man was acting like a free human being — making a conscious choice to resist authority.

Even if you spent most of your day using some kind of electronic device, you're not a light-emitting diode or a computer chip. We should never consider ourselves a functional component of any new technological system. We are physical beings that have been given the privilege and the power to say no.

When your own moment arrives, it probably won't involve a column of tanks, but you'll know that there is no other alternative. You must confront authority or your true Self would no longer exist.

The new surveillance states have placed us in an invisible prison. If we wish to break free, we need only to step forward and open the door.