

Still No Terrorism Toll on Privacy

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If you believe the headlines, you'd be convinced that the federal government was invading Americans' privacy like never before. Reports of surveillance cameras on public streets, superstrong X-rays in airports and the Pentagon's Total Information Awareness database have fueled a general perception that privacy has taken a back seat to national security.

Why don't I buy this line? Because actual government monitoring of U.S. citizens hasn't substantially changed in the two years since Sept. 11, 2001. If you don't believe me, try the experiment I ran last week. I kept track of everything I did and investigated any possible government surveillance of what I was doing. The result? A generous estimate that 3% of my time was tracked by the feds. The typical American, by contrast, was probably watched far less than 1% of last week. If you're wondering how I arrived at these numbers, here's a rundown.

First up: hearth and home. There is perhaps no more important zone of privacy than the family dwelling. Yet how much of our time there is actually monitored by the government? According to ACNielsen, the typical American has the television on for 3.75 hours per day; spends a half hour reading books, newspapers or magazines; and uses a little more than two hours eating, washing and doing other things. Capping off the average American's day is a seven-hour sleep. But none of this activity is tracked by the government. There are no cameras or sensors in my home or yours.

Next up: the workday. The average employed American spends nine to 9.5 hours working each day, according to the Families and Work Institute. During this workday, two-thirds of companies reportedly perform some kind of employee monitoring. But my peers at other companies say this is

limited to cameras at entrances and sensitive locations and to periodic investigations of problem cases. No one monitors the entire workforce all the time, and no one feeds this type of information to the government. Still no sign of Big Brother.

Finally: the public space. Do we still have privacy in public, if there is such a thing? The average working American spends 40 to 60 minutes commuting each day and varying amounts of evenings and weekends out and about. About half will encounter video surveillance used by their local police forces on roads, street corners and parking lots. But 65% of these systems have been in use for five years or more, long before 9/11. Their growth is greatly restrained by the number of police officers available to monitor them. In only two cities I know of -- New York and Washington, unsurprisingly -- law enforcement agencies since 9/11 have made a concerted effort to cooperate with the vast network of private surveillance cameras.

So when was I tracked? One day, I flew in and out of Chicago, spending four hours at the two airports. After 9/11, the Transportation Security Administration implemented a database to screen travelers for suspicious patterns. If my itinerary raised a flag, those four hours might have been spent under surveillance.

I also sent several Internet e-mails last week. The typical American likewise spends one hour per day reading and sending e-mails. After 9/11, the Patriot Act authorized the FBI to cooperate with Internet service providers to filter e-mail for suspicious patterns. If my missives raised a flag, they may have spent some time on the screen of an FBI special agent. But in all probability, neither my trip nor my e-mails were surveilled by human eyes. So what has all the fuss been about? Government cameras aren't in our homes or workplaces. Our DNA isn't being secretly gathered. Plans for a Total Information Awareness database were swiftly killed in bipartisan

fashion, as were plans to have your mail carriers report to the government unusual things they saw on their routes. Proposals for a national identification card never made it to a vote. The X-ray technology that would see through clothing hasn't been implemented, and Tampa, Fla., the first U.S. city to use facial-recognition technology in its public surveillance system, canceled that program. Plans to use spy satellites to track automotive and people's movement in foreign cities are still just that -- plans. Outside of banks, airlines, Internet service providers and the surveillance networks of New York and Washington, there is no grand data-sharing alliance between industry and government.

We Americans love to mistrust our government. It's our deep mistrust of a distant king that keeps us freer than any nation on earth. Terrorism still has had no toll on American privacy because of the constant vigilance of watchdog organizations and active citizens.

But those who yell fire at the first smell of smoke abuse the right of free speech. People who are privileged to speak at the public microphone -- especially reporters and privacy experts -- have a grave responsibility to stick to the facts. Our security may one day depend on it.

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