

## Shrinking Technology - Shrinking Privacy?

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Most of us **assume** that we have at least the "privacy of anonymity" when we're out and about - after all, if we're not movie stars or (especially now) politicians, who would really care about taking our pictures?

Oh, sure, since the days of the Brownie it was possible for someone to "steal our soul" in a picture, although given the lack of zoom lenses in those early days we'd have a fighting chance of noticing. Also, in those olden days, pictures could be taken but there was no immediacy in their use. Film had to be developed, prints had to be handed around, and other physical barriers prevented this from being much of an issue.

Today, however, in a rapidly growing world of "PhoneCams" and more, the rules are different. Someone surreptitiously taking a PhoneCam shot of you could just as easily be looking up a note or appointment or phone number on their cell phone (since it can be held in a normal manner and not "up to the eye.") And, perhaps most significantly, since most PhoneCams can be set to automatically, and instantly, publish the pictures they take on a public Web site, the result is irretrievably, and immediately, "out there" for the world to see. (Which means that the old "detective movie ploy" of an aggrieved photo subject ripping the film out of a camera to preserve their privacy, is now relegated to old movies.) Some businesses take the related threat of industrial espionage through pictures so seriously that they're already banning PhoneCams from the premises. And some people are calling for a mandated "shutter sound" from such picture-capable devices.

So "privacy in public," and eventually privacy in the workplace, may already be "dead," but hasn't quite yet noticed its changed situation. Yet this form of a technological loss of privacy, and of others we'll see below, are only the beginning of technology's changing the privacy rules:

### **This Is No Key Ring!**



Consider this excerpt from a Jan. 12 CNN.com report describing products introduced at the recent Consumer Electronics Show (CES):

*"Philips introduced a digital camcorder the size of a key ring, including a 1.5-gigabyte hard drive that can store up to 24 minutes of video. The device, roughly the size of a Pez candy dispenser, can also hold digital photos or MP3 songs."*

[CNN.com](http://CNN.com) and [Business Wire](http://Business Wire)

## Truth Or Consequences

How about this excerpt, from the same source:

*"One little gadget debuting at CES claims to put truth detection voice analysis on the bridge of your nose.*

*"Voice Analysis Eyeglasses" provide real-time analysis on the inside of the lenses about whoever is talking at the time, says its maker, the Israeli company Nemesysco, which developed the technology for counterterrorism and government customers.*

*"A chip inside the glasses is able to read the voice frequency of the person you are talking to," said Beata Gutman, a spokeswoman for the company. "The voice is analyzed through that chip and there are lights that indicate whether the person is lying."*

(I've read that similar technology has proven about 85% effective, but of course I wouldn't take bets on how well, and reliably, such a device might work without extensive testing.)

## No Fooling THESE Parents (Or Employers)!

Or, consider this from the Jan. 20 [Mike's List](#):

*"A new service available in Australia called Text Track enables parents, employers and others to find out roughly where a phone is by querying it via SMS. The phone replies with an SMS message revealing the location without ringing or notifying the carrier of the phone. "Zones" can be set up -- for example, if junior is grounded from going to the mall, that location can be flagged -- and parents get a message if the zone is violated."*

## Turning The Tables

For another example of how technology is invading our previous ideas of "privacy," consider some "fun" that Engineering Professor and long-time cyborg Steve Mann, of the University of Toronto, has as he exploits his built-in Internet-connected computer and eye-mounted display with built-in video camera -- he "turns the tables" on big business:



*"...Mann has created performance art by shooting video in stores that prohibit it, using handheld cameras more noticeable than the "EyeTap" ocular computing system he normally wears. When employees tell him filming is not allowed, Mann points to the stores' own surveillance cameras behind darkened domes in the ceiling.*

*Then he tells the employees that "HIS manager" makes him film public places for HIS security -- how does he know, he tells them, that the fire exits aren't chained shut? -- and that they'll have to talk to HIS manager."*

[CNN.com](#)

On a lower technological note, certain PC-based answering machines (and other devices) allow you to record your phone conversations - imagine the consternation of many a business who has just told you that "This conversation may be monitored or recorded for quality assurance purposes," if

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you say the same right back to them! (Check the legality of this in your area, of course.) The point is, technology can give as it takes away.

### **Your Car May NOT Be Your Friend!**

Speaking of a lack of privacy, consider that, according to the Dec. 11, 2003 [News Max](#), court records have revealed that law enforcement agencies have already been using GM's "OnStar" in-car communications system to surreptitiously listen in to conversations in the car during a non-terrorist criminal investigation! And OnStar is built-in to most new GM cars.

Although the FBI lost this particular court challenge to using OnStar, it wasn't because the court was concerned with the invasion of privacy issue, but only because the,

"...OnStar passive listening feature disables the emergency signal, the very life-saving call for help that the advertisements tout as the main reason to purchase the system."

So presumably, once they figure out how to listen-in without disabling OnStar's emergency functionality, they'd be free to do so again.

By the way, are you SURE that such functionality isn't buried deep within your cell phone?

### **The Bottom Line**

Most of us don't want to give up our (at least illusion of) privacy, and many believe that there should be stringent laws in-place to protect people against illegal access to, and use of, legitimately private information. But it's hard to take a position on whether these changes are 'good' or 'bad,' because the now-common commodity technologies of PhoneCams and GPS and "cars that talk" have simply rendered a lack of privacy as reality.

Not to mention infrared cameras that can see indoor "growing rooms" in a house from the street. And Ultra Wideband (UWB) radar that can now see through walls. And consider technology similar to that used on televised football games to allow virtual replays from any point on the field -- it's now being applied to,

*"...combine the video from many [surveillance] cameras into a 3D model of an area. Instead of watching the world through a soda straw [many screens from many individual cameras], this is essentially taking video and putting it into context... [Grab a Video Flashlight joystick] and you can swoop down hallways and fly around buildings, immersing yourself in a [real-time] scene [put together from many cameras]."*

(See "Seamless Surveillance" in the Feb., 2004 [Technology Review](#) [subscription required]).

And more.

Like the proverbial genie, it's unlikely that these technologies will be tricked back into their bottles.

### **It's A Two-Way Street**

In a somewhat satisfying "counter" to today's wide (and growing) deployment of surveillance cameras, today's devices and future commodity "Eye Taps" that augment our senses may help "even the odds" by allowing many more people to more comprehensively capture inappropriate actions by those who appear to abuse their power -- remember the Rodney King videos, for example. And, just wait until software gets better at auto-analyzing the terabytes of video and audio that we'll all be collectively producing -- perhaps eventually creating a "Video Flashlight" virtual view of the real world from the data captured by the millions of expanded-PhoneCam-carrying people...

I don't relish the dark side of where this could lead, but the technologies to let everyone (or other persons) record their lives 24x7x365.25 if they wish, are steadily moving forward.

Let's be sure that as these technologies mature, we implement them into our societies in ways that we can, quite literally, live with.

*This essay is original and was specifically prepared for publication at Future Brief. A brief biography of Jeff Harrow can be found at our main [Commentary](#) page. Other essays written by Jeff Harrow can be found at his [web site](#). Jeff receives e-mail at [jeff@theharrowgroup.com](mailto:jeff@theharrowgroup.com).*

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