Chapter 13
Why Where You are Matters:
Mundane Mobilities, Transparent Technologies, and Digital Discrimination

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ABSTRACT

The traceability of bodies and goods has become a central feature of surveillance systems in the twenty-first century. This heightened visibility is made possible by numerous technical means but among the most important is the global expansion of mobile telephony. By this means, for example, employers may trace the location of employees, parents of children, marketers of consumers and police of suspects. How this happens involuntarily, how it builds on the 'mundane mobilities' of voluntarily acknowledging the location of the caller, what its consequences are for the increased transparency of, and digital discrimination among, mobile telephone users, is discussed in the context of broad theories of surveillance today. These technologies are in constant development, that simultaneously renders them more effective as surveillance devices and they are thus of more than mere academic interest.

KEEPING TRACK, IN TRANSIT

Howard Boyle, the president of a fire sprinkler installation company in Woodside, New York, sends his workers out to sites where systems are established or serviced. In 2003 he gave five such workers company phones with a GPS feature, though he did not tell them about the latter. He can now check if they have arrived at a site, and whether they are moving around or are sitting still.

He hopes that he will be able to sort out billing queries where installation times are disputed, and boasts that he can call his workers to ask "where are you now?" while looking at a screen that tells him just that (Harmon 2003).

Such applications of "location technologies" are fairly well known in the world of work but perhaps the largest changes in this field have been in commercial domains, especially using combinations of internet and mobile phone technologies. Here, the question of why where you are matters – to whom? – becomes more significant. It is

obvious that employers would want to keep track, but why would ordinary people use machines that permit their location to be known to anyone with the right software? The iPhone, for instance, has an application called "WhosHere" that knows where you are, shows you other users nearby and allows you to chat with them. For one user, Mathew Honan, who wrote about his experiment with a location-aware lifestyle (Honan 2009) the consequences are very mixed. He found himself in contact with at least as many people with whom he did not want to communicate as ones about whom he was positive. And he mentioned almost nothing about the marketers who are very keen indeed to get hold of location data.

Keeping track of where people are has always been important for families, employers, authorities. They want to know that children are safe, workers are busy, and that citizens are living lawfully. In the modern era, with its bureaucratic organizations and high mobility rates, schools, government departments, marketers, law enforcement and emergency services also want to know where people are – as students, claimants, consumers, offenders and accident victims. In fast-moving mobile societies, too, people simply want to keep in touch with friends, acquaintances, family. Hence the popularity of devices that permit constant contact. Anxiety, care, distrust and opportunism can be strong incentives to find ways of finding people, of locating them at specific times.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century especially, the ability to trace people's whereabouts while in transit has grown enormously, and very fast. Howard Boyle simply would not have been able to keep track of his sprinkler employees by mobile (or cell) phone[1] in the early 1990s. Nor would parents have been able to fit monitoring devices in their children's cars, or in the pockets of their own Alzheimer's-afflicted parents. Tracing parolees by satellite would have sounded like science fiction, and posting invitations by text message to potential customers passing near to Starbucks like a marketer's fantasy. All these things now happen.

However, these tracking technologies develop, not because of some supposed "logic of technology" but because of an ongoing negotiation between social entities – cultural, economic, political – and social-technical systems. While many analysts focus on the fast-moving, fragmented, and disembodied aspects of contemporary cultures it is worth noting that those most affected by mobile technologies (above all I have in mind the mobile or cell phone) use them in relation to very mundane aspects of life. Indeed, email addresses and phone numbers constitute fixed coordinates for relationships within the apparently blurred world of motion.[2]

It is a truism that some earlier technical innovations have contributed in extraordinary ways to fresh patterns of social relationship. The clock and the computer, mundane though they seem today, are paramount examples of such 'exotic' technologies. Publicly coordinated synchronic time permits all manner of convenient meetings and management procedures, from school schedules to train timetables. Clocks became a vital part of the capitalist enterprise, particularly for measuring labour time down to the minute and thus for controlling workers. Computers, too, have contributed enormously to the surveillance capacities of all major social institutions, as an aspect of increasing efficiency and productivity.[3] These taken-for-granted technologies have far-reaching implications for power relations within the modern, bureaucratic, capitalistic contexts where they were developed.

In some similar ways, mobile technologies already show signs of being singularly significant within emerging patterns of "liquid" social life (Bauman 2001, 2005). Mobile technologies enter the empty gaps in social life, areas once thought of as "dead" time used for travel, and bring them back to life. As Nicola Green (2002: 290) says, such "Lazarus time" may be resurrected for family or business purposes. But it can equally be

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