

### **Thoughts on Volunteered (Geo)Slavery**

Nancy Obermeyer, Ph.D.  
Indiana State University

The discussion of geosurveillance has a rich history among geographers, dating back to at least 1991 at the “GIS and Society” meeting at Friday Harbor, Washington (Crampton 2003) which inaugurated an ongoing review of GIS development and implementation by geographers with a specific focus on social linkages and power relationships. During that meeting, John Pickles (1991) identified GIS as an “...extension of the monitoring and surveillant functions of the local and national state” (p. 81), and noted that promoters of GIS had presented it as an instrumental technology in service to a scientific profession. This is consistent with Curry’s (1997:685) observation that it GIS developers view it as an “autonomous technology,” that is inherently neutral (GIS doesn’t track people; people track people). When Dobson and Fisher (2006) introduced the term “geoslavery” to the discourse, they left little room for doubt regarding the risks arising from the misuse of GIS and cognate technologies. Moreover, they emphasize the seductive allure of geoslavery as embodied in Bentham’s Panopticon and George Orwell’s “Big Brother” by pointing out that such tracking “...offers real benefits to those being watched” (Dobson and Fisher 2006:4). The primary benefit, of course, is security, but there are other trade-offs that people willingly make, including convenience, cost savings and so on.

Bill Herbert, invoking the title of a jazz tune by Rahsaan Roland Kirk, has described this as “Volunteered Slavery” (personal conversation, AAAS Annual Meeting, February 2006, St. Louis, MO). The tendency of those under surveillance to embrace spatial data monitoring because of the benefits they confer, to succumb to “volunteered geoslavery” is predicted by critics of geosurveillance. The quest for safety and security is among the most basic human drives. It is therefore understandable how inciting fear has made the trade-off of spatial data privacy for security appear on balance to be a good bargain for many people.

In part, our growing comfort as a society with digital technology makes us increasingly willing to accept and perhaps even embrace geosurveillance without question. Today, consumers willingly provide an array of identifying information to retail establishments (both brick-and-mortar and on-line establishments) in exchange for special bargains, promotions, and other bonuses that are not available to anonymous shoppers. In return, the retailers offering these bargains gain a great deal of information about each of their loyal customers along with the building blocks of a data base designed to guide their

future business development activities. For the on-line consumer, the monitoring of their shopping habits usually generates a list of “suggestions” regarding future purchases based on past purchases, to which any regular customer of Amazon.com or Netflix will testify (myself included). And if that weren’t enough, closed circuit TV and electronic tracking devices record our activities whenever we are within camera shot --- which is whenever we are in most brick-and-mortar establishments (both public and private) and in some jurisdictions, when we are in any public space, including on the roads and streets.

Many of us (but not all) are aware of the indelible tracks we leave in the wake of our purchases. What some people may not know is how readily visible many of our tracks are to people who do not know us personally. Many local governments, for example, make available tax records on-line, permitting anyone with an internet connection to learn more about us than we know ourselves. Increasingly, these on-line databases are available within the framework of an on-line, searchable GIS database. For example, the tax records of property owners in humble Vigo County, Indiana, are available through an online search that provides names and addresses along with tax information (including whether or not the home-owner has paid the tax bill).

Our governments (local, county, state, federal) collect and maintain vast amounts of personal information about us. The various governmental jurisdictions record our births, our marriages, our finances (in great detail), property ownership, our employment history, our military service (or lack thereof), the make and model of our cars, any brushes with the law, our deaths, and many other details. Because much of this information is public record, it is readily available to anyone and everyone who wishes to view it. Historically, our spatial data privacy has hung on a single thread: that all this information has been housed in a large number of separate agencies and private organizations that interact on a limited basis.

That this information has historically been kept in hard copy, non-digital format, has made it difficult to integrate these disparate data sets; difficult but not impossible. Indeed, private companies have made use of these data sets to promote their business interests. Marketers regularly monitor birth records and collect and maintain this information. This enables them to send just the right coupons for just the right products at just the right time to potential purchasers. The coupons for formula arrive shortly after the baby’s birth; the coupons for “pull-up” type diapers arrive when the child is nearly two; the coupons for books based on

the “Barbie” character arrive when the child is between four and five years of age --- but only if the child is a girl.

New approaches to address spatial data privacy are needed. At the very least, it is necessary to increase public awareness of the problem which will enable people to try to secure their data privacy. Volunteered (geo)slavery is a fact of modern day life. Unless we are able to get a handle on it, perhaps we will all end up singing the refrain of jazz/blues artist Mose Allison, “I don’t worry ‘bout a thing, ‘cause nothing’s gonna be alright.”

### Works Cited

- Jeremy W. Crampton.. 2003. Cartographic Rationality and the Politics of Geosurveillance and Security. *Cartography and Geographic Information Systems*, 30: 131-144.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2006. “Surveillance, Security, and Personal Dangerousness,” paper delivered at the American Association for the Advancement of Science, in the session entitled “Orwell’s Wolf is Back at the Door: Tracking Kids, Dogs, Old People, and Everybody in Between;” February 2006: St. Louis, MO.
- Curry, Michael R. 1997. The Digital Individual and the Private Realm. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 87: 681-699.
- Dobson, Jerome E. and Peter F. Fisher. 2006. “Panopticon 3: Framing the National Debate Over Human Tracking,” paper delivered at the American Association for the Advancement of Science, in the session entitled “Orwell’s Wolf is Back at the Door: Tracking Kids, Dogs, Old People, and Everybody in Between;” February 2006: St. Louis, MO.
- Herbert, William A. 2006. “No Direction Home: Legal Principles, Issues and Potential Solutions,” paper delivered at the American Association for the Advancement of Science, in the session entitled “Orwell’s Wolf is Back at the Door: Tracking Kids, Dogs, Old People, and Everybody in Between;” February 2006: St. Louis, MO.
- Pickles, John. 1991. Geography, GIS, and the Surveillant Society. *Papers and Proceedings of Applied Geography Conferences*, 14:80-91.