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# The Discipline of Watching: Detection, Risk, and Lateral Surveillance

Mark Andrejevic

*After considering how surveillance practices discipline the objects of the monitoring gaze, I argue for a focus on the discipline of watching. An era of reflexive skepticism and generalized risk puts a premium on the ability to see through public façades by relying on strategies of detection and verification facilitated by interactive communication technologies that allow users to monitor one another. Interactive communication technologies allow for peer-to-peer surveillance of friends, significant others, and family members. If, in commercial and state contexts, the promise of interactivity serves as a ruse for asymmetrical and nontransparent forms of monitoring, this model of interactivity has also infiltrated the deployment of interactive technologies in personal relationships.*

**Keywords:** Governmentality; Interactivity; Surveillance; Reality TV; Risk; Room Raiders

With the Handy Truster, you can find out if your lover has been faithful, what your co-workers and boss really think, and how honest your friends and family truly are! . . . *Never Be Lied To Again!*—Handy Truster ad copy

In a nod to the conventional wisdom about reality TV—that it is not really *real*—the Court TV network promised to assist viewers in ferreting out deceit. Billed as “the most compelling reality show in the investigative genre,” the network’s show, called *Fake Out*, promised lessons from “Renowned polygraph expert and former FBI agent Jack Trimarco” and a test of the ability of “the average person”—in the form of selected contestants—to lie and catch others in the act of lying” (CourtTV.com, 2004). Viewers were invited to learn how to *really* watch and listen—for eminently practical purposes with direct bearing on their own lives: “Is your teenager being

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untruthful? Is your spouse not telling you the whole story? Is your employee late to work again the fifth time because of a car accident on the road? Can you spot a lie?" (CourtTV.com, 2004). In other words, can you in good conscience in today's world afford *not* to learn how to cut through the tangle of potential falsehoods? The show promised not only that the players would benefit from Trimarco's expertise, but that it would arm viewers "with the fundamental lie detection techniques that can be applied in everyday life" (CourtTV.com, 2004).

Those wanting to detect but lacking the requisite talents could have gone online to equip themselves with a \$99 portable "voice-stress analyzer" called the Handy Truster. The world of the Handy Truster has much in common with that of *Fake Out*. It is one in which those closest to us remain a potential source of risk and uncertainty. The Truster ad puts this in the form of three disconcerting, loudly capitalized questions: "Is She Cheating On You? Is He Really Working Late? What Are Your Kids Really Doing?" (Truster, 2004). It is a world in which no one, barring verification, is who one seems—the ad concedes the manipulative character of the performance of self, and therefore the generalized need for techniques of verification (mechanical and otherwise), not just in commercial transactions and state policing, but in interpersonal relationships.

Before dismissing such techniques and technology as latter-day versions of the X-ray glasses and do-it-yourself hypnosis lessons advertised in the back of comic books, it is worth considering their relationship to a climate of savvy skepticism and proliferating surveillance in the name of risk management. In particular, I locate lateral monitoring at the intersection of two cultural developments that I will discuss briefly: first, the mobilization, largely in the commercial sector, of the promise of interactivity as an alibi for nontransparent and asymmetrical forms of information gathering; and, second, the symptoms of a paradoxical and savvy skepticism directed toward the efficacy of what the critical theorist Slavoj Žižek (1999) terms the "symbolic order"—the system of signification that endows actions with social meanings. The following sections develop the relationship between interactivity and surveillance in greater detail, and then consider a pop-culture example of lateral surveillance provided by the reality TV series *Room Raiders*.

### Interactivity, Risk, and the Savvy Subject

The turn of the current century may someday be portrayed as the dawn of the "iCentury"—a period in which the prefix signifying the promise of the interactive revolution became ubiquitous. The hip little "i" that appears in front of an increasing variety of popular products (many manufactured by Apple) and concepts (including, during the 2004 election campaign, iPolitics) is freighted with a timely double meaning: both solipsistic customization and the democratic promise of the ability to talk back—to "interact." What could be more progressive and empowering than devices that allow us to interact, not just with one another, but with marketers, celebrities, media outlets, and politicians? Interactivity in this context is presented as an antidote to the depredations of mass society—a

technologically enhanced cornerstone of democratic participation insofar as it represents the ability not just to see and hear, but to be seen and heard. This optimism is reflected not just in the cyber-hype of new media pundits, but also in the academic realm by those who argue, "Far from the telescreen dystopias, new media technology hails a rebirth of democratic life" (Bryan, Tsagarousianou, & Tambini, 1998, p. 5) or "The new technology fosters the potential of the closest thing the earth has ever witnessed to participatory democracy on an enormous scale" (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 323).

The promise may turn out to be very different from the reality, as the celebration of interactivity remains both premature and largely unexamined. Although scattered enthusiastically and indiscriminately throughout popular and academic descriptions of new media, the term is ill-defined and slippery. It has been used to describe everything from staying in constant contact with friends, family and relatives to voting for a favorite *American Idol*. Its ubiquity is rivaled by its referential flexibility. As one group of researchers noted, "Even the 'experts' are not yet certain exactly what the concept means" (Downes & McMillan, 2000, p. 165). Somewhere in the mix, the positive associations of interactivity as a form of two-way, symmetrical, and relatively transparent communication have been assimilated to forms of interaction that amount to little more than strategies for asymmetrical, nontransparent forms of monitoring and surveillance. Commercial and state-sponsored forms of monitoring facilitated by new information and communication technologies, such as database programs, networked devices, and search algorithms, are characterized by asymmetries that are rapidly becoming hallmarks of the type of "interactivity" citizens and consumers encounter on a regular basis. That is to say, information is gathered about citizens and consumers often without any information regarding what information is being gathered, when, and for what purposes. Meyrowitz (1985) describes this process as a "*nonreciprocal* loss of privacy" in which "we lose the ability to monitor those who monitor us" (p. 322).

The defining irony of the interactive economy is that the labor of detailed information gathering and comprehensive monitoring is being offloaded onto consumers in the name of their empowerment. Consider, for example, the case of the Nike iD interactive marketing campaign that allowed customers to design their own shoes online (and, for a short time, via a cell phone connection to an interactive billboard display in New York City's Times Square). The marketing world greeted the Nike promotion with predictable techno-hype, describing the interactive billboard with headlines including, "Nike Empowers Mobile Users with Design Capabilities" (Nike retailing innovation, 2005). The Nike iD Web site offered consumers the promise of entry, if only momentarily and symbolically, to the hallowed halls of a corporate icon: "NIKE iD is your chance to be a NIKE designer." The site addressed consumers as apprentice producers poised to seize the drawing board from those who have too long monopolized it, "You begin with a blank item—or an inspiration—and express your individuality by adding color and a personal iD" (Nikeid.com)

### Cybernetic Interactivity

Before discussing how the Nike campaign efficiently exploited several facets of the promise of interactivity, it is worth parsing the elements of the campaign. First is the promise of individuation: Thanks to the power of networked interactivity, mass marketing can transcend its own homogeneity. Interactivity promotes what pundit Josh Marshall (2005) has referred to, in political terms, as the “grand moral inversion.” The corporate giant, erstwhile foe of individuality, is miraculously revealed to be one of its greatest facilitators, thanks to the alchemy of interactivity. Drawing on the longstanding U.S. tradition of equating market choice with freedom, the promise connects personal expression through customized commodities with shifting power relations. As the president of an interactive marketing company that worked on the Nike iD campaign put it: “The Web gives the consumer empowerment and control. . . . Consumers own the brands, not the companies” (Mack, 2000). The power shift is purportedly in the direction of democratization. As a *Toronto Star* commentary put it, “Some see a political dimension to all of this, in that it points to a new market-based democratic egalitarianism” (My Logo: Are we the new brand bullies? 2005, p. D04). This ersatz version of power sharing serves as an alibi for the market-research role of the interactive campaign in building brand loyalty while at the same time enticing consumers to participate in the process of “co-creating unique value” (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Customized shoes, already more expensive, invite consumers to participate in the marketing process: “Profitable or not, the sneaker sites have one very practical application: They open up a wealth of market research possibilities. Thousands of shoppers logging their preferences on the minutiae of laces, tongues and soles amounts to a free focus group” (D’Amato, 2005, p. F01).

This form of interactive participation might best be described as *cybernetic* in the word’s original sense of feedback-based control. Norbert Wiener, the MIT mathematician whose neo-Greek neologism (derived from the word for “steersman”) permeates the discourse on new media in the truncated form of the familiar “cyber-” prefix, noted that the technology called interactive facilitates increasingly sophisticated forms of centralized control. Wiener (1961) consistently emphasized the link to questions of power and control: “We have decided to call the entire field of control and communication theory, whether in the machine or the animal, by the name cybernetics” (p. 19). If, as Spiro Kiousis (2002) suggests, “any discussion of interactivity inevitably draws from its roots in Cybernetic theory, as outlined by Wiener” (p. 59), the latter’s work—and his reservations—might be a good place to start in contextualizing and critiquing the promise of interactivity. Given their focus on technology that incorporates detailed data collection in an ongoing process of adjustment to shifting conditions, Wiener’s theories apply to contemporary examples of interactive technology, such as Web sites that alter their appearance in response to viewer behavior; interactive billboards that customize their advertising appeals; and TV shows whose outcome is based on viewer voting. The persistent use of the prefix “cyber-” in the popular and academic reception of new media serves as an

inadvertent but telling clue regarding the element of control that characterizes the deployment of interactivity in the networked realm of cyberspace. Taking a cue from Wiener's work, we might rethink of this as "directed space" or "*governed*" space.

Such an approach envisions the potential of networked interactivity to foster not democratic participation but the consolidation of centralized command and control predicated on asymmetrical forms of observation and information gathering. Tellingly, Wiener highlighted the possibility that a cybernetic model might be deployed not just as a technique of mechanical control, but as one of information-based social control. The use of cybernetic systems, he warned, might result in a society in which entrenched economic and political powers managed the populace by tailoring messages in response to audience feedback.

Rather than speaking of interactivity in a sense that blurs the distinction between asymmetrical information gathering and two-way, transparent information exchange, it might be more useful to speak of a range of *interactivities* with varying consequences for power relations and issues of democratization and centralized control. Meyrowitz (1985) observed that "if the new technologies have any 'inherent bias,' it may be against . . . a sharply hierarchical system" (p. 321). Pearce (1997) claimed, "No matter which way you look at it, interactivity is inherently subversive" (p. 244). And Wriston (quoted in Barney, 2000, p. 19) predicts that "the force of microelectronics will blow apart all monopolies, hierarchies, pyramids, and power grids of established industrial society." All three invoke a version of interactivity that implies reciprocity of information gathering and exchange. In practice, however, the deployment of interactive technologies by both the commercial sector and the state remains, in many contexts, largely asymmetrical or nonreciprocal, patterned more on a panoptic version of "interactivity" than on mutual transparency and accountability. News media, for example, have highlighted the asymmetry of state monitoring in the post 9/11 era; during this time, the government has sought to expand technologically facilitated monitoring programs while at the same time shielding its actions from public scrutiny. The news coverage can hardly be considered a form of reciprocal monitoring insofar as one of its recurring themes is just how little we know about the government's use of new media technology to accumulate, store, and sort information about citizens.

Against this background of asymmetric, nontransparent forms of information gathering, the revolutionary promise of interactivity to shatter hierarchy and centralized control enacts the return of Foucault's "repressive hypothesis." Its 21st-century, high-tech version portrays technologically facilitated forms of interactivity as providing the promise of revolutionary liberation from forms of centralized, top-down control characteristic of industrial capitalism. The incessant and multiplying forms of "talking back" incited by the interactive revolution are presented as subversive, empowering assertions of individuality that challenge top-down management and control. The marketers who encourage viewers and consumers to "vote" online, to create online profiles, and to provide detailed information about their backgrounds, their consumption patterns, and their tastes and preferences, echo

Foucault's (1994) formulation of the 19th-century incitement to self-disclosure: "Tell me your desires, [and] I'll tell you who you are" (p. 128).

Rather than subversive challenges to governance and control, the forms of self-disclosure (masquerading as self-expression) that migrate from the spaces of the confessional and examination room into cyberspace facilitate the detailed specification of individual consumers as well as the formulation of those tactics most likely to make them amenable to the ministration of marketers. Asymmetry lies at the heart of panoptic power—in terms of both the monitoring process and the structured power relations that characterize panoptic institutions. That is, the intricate arrangement of one-way monitoring technologies characteristic of the Panopticon does not *create* the power relations that define the ability of authorities to exercise control over the bodies arrayed within it. Rather it amplifies, extends, and automates this power: "The panoptic schema makes any apparatus of power more intense: it assures its economy (in material, in personnel, in time); it assures its efficacy by its preventative character, its continuous functioning and its automatic mechanisms" (Foucault, 1995, p. 206). The point is important in that it highlights the fact that a simple rearrangement of the panoptic mechanism does not necessarily reconfigure the structured relations of power within which it functions (although it may render the exercise of power less *efficient*).

The efficient amplification of power relies, as Foucault notes, on a further asymmetry between observer and observed wherein the latter remains unaware of the extent and duration of monitoring. The resulting internalization of the monitoring gaze by subjects "caught up in a power situation of which they themselves are the bearer" (Foucault, 1995, p. 223) provides some continuity between Foucault's writing on Panopticism and his later work on governance. In both cases, Foucault (1995, p. 211) explores techniques of control and governance that rely on the formation of subjects responsible for making the imperatives of authorities their own. Panoptic power remains a technique for efficient management—even as it migrates beyond the walls enclosing the prison, the school, and the asylum. Foucault anticipated this migration in his discussion of the "swarming of disciplinary mechanisms": "While . . . the disciplinary establishments increase, their mechanisms have a certain tendency to become 'de-institutionalized,' to emerge from the closed fortresses in which they once functioned and to circulate in a 'free' state." This circulation embraces the monitoring function itself, which overflows institutional boundaries not just in the sense that authorities seek to monitor extra-institutional behavior (the conduct of students outside of school, for example), but also insofar as they rely on the monitoring capacities of extra-institutional adjuncts: neighbors, acquaintances, parents, and so on. The process of government, understood as "an activity that undertakes to conduct individuals throughout their lives" (Foucault, 1994, p. 67), entails the coordination of distributed mechanisms of discipline with the imperatives of "political, social, and economic authorities" (Rose, 1996, p. 58). Such comprehensive and continuous coordination relies upon popular subjection not just to the discipline of being watched, but also to that of watching out for one another (in both senses). The two go hand-in-hand: lateral monitoring takes place with an eye to the

monitoring gaze of authorities who set the guidelines for subjects responsible for their own security—a responsibility that includes keeping an eye on those around them.

Among those forms of discipline to which citizens are increasingly subject, then, is that of monitoring one another—not in the sense of mutual monitoring, which implies transparent, reciprocal observation, but in the asymmetrical, nontransparent sense associated with lateral surveillance. Human society has always been characterized by various forms of peer monitoring, just as all governments have developed mechanisms for monitoring their citizens. My goal here is not to assert the distinctness, in the abstract, of the category of lateral surveillance, but to consider its historical specificity within the technological context of the development of interactive media and the political context of postwelfare-state forms of neo-liberal governance that take place in the name of risk management.

As Hay (2006) argues, risk and security play central roles in techniques of neo-liberal governance that “can be said to have formed around on-going insecurities” (p. 334). The various risks identified and targeted by authorities—and often amplified by media campaigns—define the contours of a situation in which members of the populace are enjoined to take responsibility for their own welfare. Embracing the proposed guidelines for maximizing efficiency and minimizing risk in the self-management of one’s own affairs means adopting the formulation of the situation by economic and political authorities.

It is in this regard that such techniques of governance can be described as “animated by the desire to ‘govern at a distance’” (Rose, 1996, p. 43). That is, “indirect” control takes the form of both the manipulation of the background situation and the promulgation of guidelines (via various government and commercial campaigns) for “responsible” citizens charged with negotiating the shifting landscape of risk and threat. As Foucault (1994, p. 70) put it, “the population appears as ‘naturally’ dependent on multiple factors that may be artificially alterable” offering “a purchase for concerted interventions (through laws, but also through changes of attitude, of ways of acting and living that can be obtained through ‘campaigns’).”

Understood as a skill for negotiating an era in which responsibility for the management of a proliferating array of risks is offloaded onto the citizenry, lateral surveillance is another technique translating “the goals of political, social, and economic authorities into the choices and commitments of individuals” (Rose, 1996, p. 58). The promotion of lateral surveillance campaigns such as, for example, those mobilized by the Department of Homeland Security (“we all have a role in hometown security”) or the city of East Orange’s “Virtual Community Patrol” (which allows select citizens online access to police surveillance cameras), not only extends the reach of police surveillance but also, crucially, invites citizens to define the problem (war on crime, war on terror) in terms formulated by authorities. Interactive participation, to the extent that it is structured by asymmetrical power relations and understood as, by definition, a monitored activity, can serve as a technique for



instilling a sense of identification with the priorities of those who control the means of interaction.

### **Watching Out for One Another**

Interpersonal interaction always contains an element of mutual monitoring, but the deployment of interactive networked communication technology allows individuals to avail themselves of the forms of asymmetrical, nontransparent information gathering modeled by commercial and state surveillance practices. The democratization of access to some of the same tools for information gathering and storage mobilized by state and commercial entities allows those with access to the technology to adopt strategies of marketing and detection in their interpersonal interactions. Consider, for example, the migration of keystroke monitoring software from office to home use. Richard Eaton, the president of keystroke-monitoring software manufacturer WinWhatWhere (later renamed TrueActive), told an interviewer that he was surprised by consumer demand for the product when it was first marketed: "We started getting calls from spouses that are spying on their other spouse. . . . I had no idea it would ever be used for that. That never even crossed our mind . . . it's something like 20 percent of our business now, and growing" (Brancaccio, 2000). The TrueActive Web site has since incorporated marketing blurbs about the benefits of surreptitious spousal and family monitoring in a risk-rich online environment. When it comes to children, such forms of monitoring are portrayed as a parental duty: "You should no more let your child roam the Internet without supervision than you should let your child roam the city alone." As for those who would spy on their spouses:

This is tough. A natural reaction is to dismiss monitoring a spouse's computer use. However, there ARE times where such use may be appropriate, even prudent. In cases of online affairs, cheating, gambling, and addiction, TrueActive is a powerful tool for getting at the truth. (TrueActive, 2004)

To the extent that the slippery term "interactivity" becomes colonized by its commercial and state uses, these nonreciprocal forms of monitoring infuse interpersonal uses of interactive communication technology. The available technology makes it increasingly easy to gather information about friends and acquaintances online without their knowledge, and even to check up on spouses, children, or significant others by viewing their cell phone call lists, or by going online to any number of background-check Web sites. An ongoing survey I am conducting of monitoring practices among college students, for example, revealed that about 12 percent (of a convenience sample of more than 500 respondents) had gone to public records sites to run criminal background checks on friends and acquaintances. A 2002 study by the Pew Center's Internet and American Life project found that one in three Internet users had looked up someone else's name online, overwhelmingly for "personal reasons" (Fox, 2002). The perceived intrusiveness of these practices may vary widely, but forms of information retrieval facilitated by, for example, researching

someone through a server such as Google may well have been considered borderline stalking before they became so commonplace.

A world in which interpersonal interaction increasingly relies on deterritorialized and mobile forms of electronic mediation—cell phones, Instant Messaging, e-mailing, and so on—ushers in a related set of techniques and technologies of verification to address the resulting risks. Online dating can be considered a form of online shopping that makes it possible to meet scores of potential dates and mates in a single sitting without leaving the privacy of one's home. At the same time, it increases potential risks, since people are not necessarily who they say they are. One response is the development of online strategies for countering the risks associated with online anonymity. Background-check Web sites are littered with testimonials about the risks of online dating: "I met him through a personal ad on the web . . . love on-line, what a concept. . . . We exchanged photos, talked on the phone and wrote letters. . . . He told me he loved me and wanted to marry me. I thought I loved him too. And then I got a call from his wife" (Check-Mate.com, n.d.). Some dating sites, such as True.com, offer "criminal background screening" and threaten to prosecute married people who pass themselves off as single "to the full extent of the law." Monitoring, on this account, minimizes the risk of deception. It can also make interactions more efficient or effective. The background-check site Abika.com (n.d.) claims: "Met someone online? Met someone in a bar? Check them out before you invest your time, emotions and resources. Make a better impression on your date. Click here to find out what your date really likes." Similarly, respondents to my surveillance survey indicated that they used social networking sites (like Facebook.com and MySpace.com) and Google searches to gather information about prospective dates. One respondent said that going online allows her to answer the question, "What kind of person am I dating or plan to date?" Another said: "I'm not a stalker. Mainly I just use Facebook to remember stuff about people I meet at bars." This kind of information gathering, formerly conducted through social networks that radiate information more or less symmetrically (the searcher knows that the fact of the search will likely be noted and reported on), can now take place in the register of marketing research: in relative anonymity and on a vastly expanded scale. The asymmetric character of this kind of information gathering is perhaps highlighted by the fact that although more than three-quarters of the respondents said they had used the Internet for monitoring purposes, less than a third indicated knowing that they had been the target of searches. As one respondent noted: "Facebook . . . allows you to find out a lot of information about a person without even having them know you were inquiring about them."

### **Savvy Observers**

As the ongoing news coverage of the potential risks of online interaction suggests, the enhanced freedom to make and sustain new forms of interpersonal connections comes with increased individual responsibility for managing the potential risks of such interactions. The consequence of a culture of mutual detection is the

transposition of a culture of “categorical suspicion” (Marx, 1988) (in which entire groups are treated, similarly, as potential suspects) from the realm of post-9/11 policing to that of personal relationships. This savvy skepticism underlying this culture of detection is reflexive in the double sense of both an increasingly automatic response and that of rebounding back upon itself. It is this second aspect that Zizek (1999) invokes when he diagnoses contemporary forms of skepticism as evidence of the decline of “symbolic efficiency.” For Zizek, the notion of self-presentation as performance relies upon the effectiveness of a symbolic system that endows these performances with shared significance. Take, for example, the public performance of a judge as described by Meyrowitz (1985), in his gloss on Erving Goffman: “even an honest judge must play the role of ‘honest judge’” (p. 30). The rejoinder to the “naïve” charge that role-playing constitutes a form of duplicity is that *all* social interactions are a form of role-playing. The effectiveness of the judge’s ability to play the role of judge is based not just on the talents, good will, or professionalism of a particular individual but also on the social conventions that define the proper public demeanor of a judge and endow them with social authority. The savvy skepticism described by Zizek is directed not toward the judge’s performance per se, but more generally toward the conventions which provide the basis for a meaningful performance. As Zizek (1999) puts it, symbolic efficiency relies upon:

the symbolic mask-mandate matter[ing] more than the direct reality of the individual who wears this mask and/or assumes this mandate. This function involves the structure of fetishistic disavowal: “I know very well that things are the way I see them [that this person is a corrupt weakling], but none the less I treat him with respect, since he wears the insignia of a judge, so that when he speaks it is the Law itself which speaks through him.” (p. 323)

Reflexive savviness short-circuits symbolic efficiency, brushing aside the symbolic mandate, to get directly at the “corrupt weakling” behind the black robe. Such skepticism paradoxically defaults to a recuperation of the naïve positivism it sought to surpass. The revelation that all is appearance threatens to make appearance itself disappear (or default to an inertly “given” reality). In this regard, the attempt to capture a trace of extradiscursive reality associated with techniques of asymmetrical surveillance and bodily monitoring serves as a means of sustaining the appearance of appearance qua appearance (to borrow a formulation from Hegel). The Handy Truster should accordingly be read not as a deviation from or challenge to an era of generalized savviness but, like the recently hyped science of neuro-marketing (that bypasses focus group testing to directly measure consumers’ brain waves), one of its symptoms.

The popularity of reality TV may be another, insofar as it offers itself up as a training ground for the cultivation of such forms of surveillance and detection. The paradoxical promise of the genre is to use a variety of contrived techniques—including hidden cameras, perpetual surveillance, surprise, and even mild forms of torture—to extract and isolate moments of uncontrived reality. In a description that might equally apply to savvy political viewership, Hill (2002) noted that for British reality TV viewers, “part of the attraction in watching BB [*Big Brother*] is to look for a

moment of authenticity in relation to selfhood. . . . The ‘game’ is to find the ‘truth’ in the spectacle/performance environment” (p. 337). The so-called interactive character of a show like *Big Brother* encourages viewers to use this search for authenticity as a means of deciding whom to vote off the show and why. My (2004) study of *Big Brother* fans (during the first U.S. season, when the audience could vote to evict cast members) noted that “viewers took this task seriously, devoting much of their time to establishing who was being phony and who real” (p. 130).

A show like *Fake Out* makes the investigatory gaze invoked by the promise of access to unscripted reality a central theme. If audiences are going to look for telltale clues, why not train viewers in the art of detection—as both a form of entertainment and a practical life skill. In this respect, the show has an affinity with a subgenre of what might be described as training shows—formats like *Nanny 911*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and *How Clean is Your House?* that offer instruction in techniques of self- and family management (for an insightful discussion of this subgenre, see Ouellette and Hay, forthcoming). Such shows may be entertaining, but they are also portrayed as educational forms of self-help for cultivating the skills to successfully navigate a climate of ubiquitous risk. The interactive character of reality TV models interactivity as a form of detection and interrogation. On such shows, viewer detection skills are exercised not on politicians, public figures, celebrities, or criminals but on the “real” people “just like the viewers” who join the ranks of flexible celebrity by becoming cast members who play themselves.

### Room Raiding

The MTV reality series *Room Raiders* provides a pop-culture portrayal of do-it-yourself detection in practice: viewers get to watch the spies “investigate” the bedrooms of potential dates before meeting them. The format, which has been through eight seasons shot in locations including Florida, Texas, and Arizona since its 2004 debut, has become one of MTV’s staple youth-oriented reality formats. The show distills for mass consumption the themes described above. It claims that one way of accessing the behind-the-façade reality of potential dates is with a surprise forensic examination, thus bypassing face-to-face conversation. The surprise, of course, is limited. Having answered a casting call on the MTV Web site for 17–23 year olds to participate in the show, participants know that the knock on the door could be coming.

When it does, it comes in the form of mock secret-police manhandling. As if highlighting the privatization and internalization of police-state protocols, each episode begins with a prime-time pastiche of procedures that appear in more somber guise on the war-time evening news: people bursting into homes, forcibly removing their occupants before they have time to hide or dispose of anything, and then conducting room-to-room searches. The targets, abducted while sleeping, showering, or dressing, are routinely dumped into an “undercover” panel van in various states of undress—without shoes or, in the case of the men, shirts. To underline this element of surprise, the voice-over during the kidnapping segment at the start of every show

announces, "They have no idea the crew is on the way; by catching them off guard they'll have no time to clean up or hide anything." As the *Room Raiders* voice-over puts it, the cast members are "in for the surprise of their lives when they find out they're being picked for a date not by their looks or charm, but by what's inside their bedrooms." The MTV Web site gets a bit more graphic, gleefully noting the intrusiveness of the investigation: "No drawer will be left unopened and no bed stain unexamined as each victim—or potential date—is mercilessly scrutinized without advance warning."

The "raider" is equipped with a metal suitcase described in each episode as a "trusty spy kit" complete with rubber gloves, metal tongs, and a portable UV light—familiar to CSI fans as a tool for revealing traces of body fluids on sheets, carpeting, and clothing. For the remainder of the show, the "searcher" investigates three bedrooms, providing a running voice-over of observations and often obscure deductions ("I like that he had a surfboard; it shows he has hobbies and some goals for himself"). Despite the fact that the camera crew following the "searcher" remains invisible, the show foregrounds the fact that the investigation doubles as performance: the investigators directly address the camera, describing their thought processes and revealing their personal preferences to the imagined audience. This gaze is redoubled by that of the abductees, who, in the back of their panel van watch the progress of the investigation on a video monitor. In this respect, the show highlights the exhibitionistic side of the voyeur: The way in which the role of the savvy investigator bypassing the manipulative façade of self-presentation is, in turn, a performance for the omniscient gaze of the audience.

For the purposes of a generalized consideration of distributed or lateral monitoring, three aspects of *Room Raiders* are worth highlighting: the way in which interactive communication technologies double as surveillance tools, the norm-enforcing character of monitoring as a means of screening for deviance, and the confirmation of forensic investigation as an efficient verification and matchmaking tool. As with many consumer-oriented shows targeting a youth demographic, computers and cell phones play a recurring role as forms of conspicuous consumption—signifiers of the high-tech connectedness of the Internet generation—and in facilitating asymmetrical, nontransparent monitoring. The multifunctionality of cell phones as portable telephone books and answering machines provides a variety of data about prospective dates: how many people call them, whom they have spoken to recently, the number of people in their phone books, and so on. Room raiders frequently pick one or more people to call on their target's cell phones to gather background information. They learn details about the looks, personality, and social lives of prospective dates by calling up friends and family members culled from the phone's built-in listings. The use of cell phones as a monitoring tool was also highlighted in the responses to my surveillance survey, which, although it focused on Internet use, asked respondents what other technologies they used to keep track of one another. The top answer was cell phones. One respondent described the process as follows: "I have checked a date's call log in his cell phone to see who he is staying in contact the most. I know several people in my age group (male and female)

who do/have done this sort of thing.” Several respondents noted that ex-significant others with access to online passwords had used e-mail and cell phone logs as a means of checking up on them: “My ex used cell phone records online to view who I was speaking with after we separated since he had access to our online in-depth account and I did not.”

On *Room Raiders*, as in law enforcement and market research, computers double as communication devices and data-gathering technologies, providing detailed information about their users. If a computer is in the room, the raiders will sooner or later search the virtual desktop for photos, music files, bookmarked Web sites, and whatever else they can find. The search is part social-sorting—an attempt to rule out incompatibles—and in part market research that evokes the claim by the background-check Web site Abika.com that most people “said they would have been able to make a much better impression on their date if they knew their dates’ personality and preferences in advance.” Computers are also storehouses of information about the user’s profession or scholarly achievements, tastes in music, and Web-browsing habits. The role played by computers on *Room Raiders* recalls the recurring news coverage of the emerging field of computer forensics—and its role in both police investigations and the state’s declared war on terror, in which cell phones and computers double as communication tools and surveillance targets. At the same time, such practices parallel those exhibited by college-aged students in the surveillance survey. They described an array of monitoring practices incorporating cell-phone call records, e-mail accounts, social networking Web sites, search engines, and public-record Web sites.<sup>1</sup> Reflecting the social priorities of the age group, by far the most common targets of the information gathering activities were friends and significant others—more than two-thirds of those who said they had searched for information online indicated they were looking up their friends, and 62 percent had looked up information about a current or former significant other.

The detection and monitoring strategies on *Room Raiders* are similarly directed toward the goal of social sorting and selection—for personal purposes. Since the ostensible goal of the show is the choice of an appropriate person to date, the narrative arc relies on the raiders’ distinctions between desirable characteristics and those that serve as grounds for disqualification. The professed desiderata of the MTV demographic might come as a surprise to those who decry the debilitating influence of pop culture on its youthful fans. In keeping with the norms of self-governance, the themes that repeatedly emerged in the investigations included job prospects, physical fitness, cleanliness, and hygiene. Reasons for dismissal include everything from smoking to untidiness, and there is often a scolding tone to the dismissals (“I didn’t like that he didn’t put his ironing board away—it was a simple task and it just shows that he’s lazy and disorganized” or “I really didn’t like the shower curtain: it was grimy and nasty. She needs to replace that”). To hear MTV tell it, today’s youth tend to enforce norms of (relatively) clean living, mainstream style, and responsible behavior. Reasons for dismissal in the 20 episodes viewed for this essay included the following: novelty handcuffs hidden in the closet (“I didn’t like the love cuffs; he’s a little too kinky for me and I’m not into that”), Goth artwork (“I really didn’t like her

gothic style; it's a little scary"), dirty flip-flops ("They were just nasty"), a whip and a porn tape ("I'm really not into that stuff"), cigarettes (twice—"I'm not down with kissing someone with smoke breath"), too many video games ("I don't want to sit home and play video games"), too much pornography (in four episodes—all in the rooms of men), and a dirty hairbrush ("if you can't take care of your hairbrush, I don't know if you can take care of yourself"). The mantle of the spy seems to carry with it a duty to enforce socially sanctioned norms of private behavior. Not surprisingly, in the postfeminist MTV world, grounds for disqualification of women include the appearance of being too overtly sexual. As one raider put it after finding a vibrator under the bed of a prospective date: "I did not like one of the rooms because it was very kinky, and even though I can be kinky, it's a little too kinky for me." Another raider dismissed a prospective date after finding that her purse doubled as an overnight bag, complete with toothbrush and deodorant, "Is this like your one-night-stand bag?" he asked disapprovingly.

In the dating world of *Room Raiders*, anonymity can be an amplifier of both risk and opportunity. When raiders are allowed to exclude those whose rooms exhibit traces of deviance and dishonesty—or just improper conduct—both raider and target are reassured that the correct choice has been made. As the woman who was rejected for being too "kinky" put it, "I think my drawer and what he found in it probably freaked him out, but that's OK—not everyone can handle it and I don't want to be with anyone who can't."

If the common refrain of other "challenge"-oriented reality shows is that of how great the "experience" was—how much it taught the cast members about themselves and their relations with others, the recurring final theme of *Room Raiders* is that the investigations yielded the correct choice. Only two of the 20 episodes viewed for this essay ended with the room raider expressing any misgivings about their final choice. For the most part, the show repeatedly confirms investigation and detection as effective tools for prescreening dates. In this respect, the show provides a pop-culture echo of the findings of psychologist Samuel Gosling described in Gladwell's (2005) book *Blink*—about the power of first-impressions and "gut" instincts. Gosling had students fill out a standard personality test and then compared how well friends evaluated the students' personalities with evaluations made by strangers who had only inspected the students' rooms. He found, Gladwell said:

On balance . . . the strangers ended up doing a much better job. What this suggests is that it is quite possible for people who have never met us and who have spent only 20 minutes thinking about us to come to a better understanding of who we are than people who have known us for years. (p. 36)

The timing of Gladwell's book and its finding that the "second brain"—the gut—can cut through the various distractions, miscues, and manipulation that taint more deliberative assessments fit neatly with the gut-instinct style of the Bush administration and its accompanying forms of savvy skepticism (toward the indeterminate and potentially obfuscating character of discursive deliberation).

### Conclusion: Exposing the Voyeurs

The peer-to-peer monitoring practices described above have been characterized as a displacement of “Big Brother” by proliferating “little brothers” who engage in distributed forms of monitoring and information gathering. Whitaker (1999), for example, invokes the model of a “participatory Panopticon” in a double sense: it represents a form of consensual submission to surveillance in part because the watched are also doing the watching. As Miller (1988) put it in a succinct reformulation of the Big Brother slogan for a reflexive era: “Big Brother is you, watching.” But even the model of a participatory Panopticon tends to focus attention on the targets of surveillance—those who are subject to various forms of information gathering and the implications of peer-to-peer or commercial monitoring for those targets. Whitaker argues that the decentralization of Big Brother amplifies Panoptic control: “There is less need for a central command centre, a single focused Eye, when the same effect can be achieved by multiple, dispersed, even competitive eyes that in their totality add up to a system of surveillance more pervasive than that imagined by Orwell” (p. 140). Similar concerns regarding the invasion of privacy or the inappropriate use of personal information, as well as forms of discrimination, exclusion, and discipline, are raised by a persistent focus on the targets of Panoptic monitoring (e.g., Foucault, 1995; Gandy, 1993; Rosen, 2000). However, in an era of distributed surveillance, the amplification of panoptic monitoring relies on the internalized discipline not just of the watched, but also of the watchers. Absent the internalization of norms of conduct and governing imperatives by the watchers, distributed surveillance would amount to little more than the pluralization of control rather than a strategy for its centralization and amplification.

The exposure of the watchers as objects of the gaze is the participatory twist highlighted by *Room Raiders*’ portrayal of peer-to-peer monitoring as spectacle. It is the moment, anticipated in Freud’s (1938, 1950) discussion of the scopic drive, wherein the role of the voyeur is redoubled by that of the exhibitionist. The savvy spy, engaged in an ongoing process of verification, is exposed as the object of what Lacan (1981) described as the imagined gaze in the field of the Other—a gaze literalized by the omniscient reality TV cameras. *Room Raiders* offers a reflexive distillation of the role of the savvy subject who, always on guard against the risks of deception, internalizes the norms and imperatives of surveillance, screening, and sorting. The contrived scene of surveillance on the show simultaneously exposes practices of investigatory voyeurism as forms of self-display. The drive to make oneself seen as someone not fooled by façades aligns itself with the performance of the savvy subject, who takes pride in the ability to discern the “real” (purely strategic and self-interested) agendas and personalities underlying public discourses and symbolic mandates.

The “room raid” is thus both examination and exhibition. By going through the rooms with investigative tools, searching dresser drawers and hard drives, the raider guards against potentially unpleasant surprises and performs for an imagined



audience the skills of detection and risk monitoring necessary for negotiating a world in which people are not always who they say they are. Practices of mutual monitoring, seen in this light, rely not just on a climate of generalized skepticism and wariness, but upon conceptions of risk that instantiate social imperatives of productivity, hygiene, and security associated with the maximization of productive forces. The discussion of *Room Raiders* is meant not as a comprehensive catalogue of the pathologies of lateral surveillance, but as a suggestive example—a pattern to “think with,” as it were, when considering other security or self-help campaigns that invoke the injunction to watch out for one another—whether for reasons of economy, efficiency, or security. As a diagram of power, mutual monitoring supplements the model of the (“swarming” of the) Panoptic with the added discipline of watching one another in order to redouble the monitoring gaze of the authorities.

If new media technologies promise more democratic access to the mode of information, the result has not been power sharing, but the injunction to embrace strategies of law enforcement and marketing at a microlevel. The participatory injunction of the interactive revolution extends monitoring techniques from the cloistered offices of the Pentagon to the everyday spaces of homes and offices, from law enforcement and espionage to dating, parenting, and social life. In an era in which everyone is to be considered potentially suspect, we are invited to become spies—for our own good.

## Note

- [1] The percentage of respondents indicating they had sought information online would have been higher—more than 80 percent—if results from Northern Ireland were removed from the data set. The sample from Northern Ireland was too small to make a significant comparison, but it was suggestive: whereas U.S. respondents treated using Google and other forms of information gathering almost as routine practice, almost all of the Irish respondents indicated that they did not use the Internet to find information about people they knew.

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