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A Casualty of the Technology Revolution: ‘Locational Privacy’

By ADAM COHEN
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When I woke up the other day, I went straight to my computer to catch up on the news and read e-mail. About 20 minutes later, I walked half a block to the gym, where I exercised for 45 minutes. I took the C train to The New York Times building, and then at the end of the day, I was back on the C train. I had dinner on my friends Elisabeth and Dan’s rooftop, then walked home seven blocks.

I’m not giving away any secrets here — nothing I did was secret to begin with. Verizon online knows when I logged on, and New York Sports Club knows when I swiped my membership card. The M.T.A. could trace (through the MetroCard I bought with a credit card) when and where I took the subway, and The Times knows when I used my ID to enter the building. AT&T could follow me along the way through my iPhone.

There may also be videotape of my travels, given the ubiquity of surveillance cameras in New York City. There are thousands of cameras on buildings and lampposts around Manhattan, according to the New York Civil Liberties Union, many near my home and office. Several may have been in a position to film dinner on Elisabeth and Dan’s roof.

A little-appreciated downside of the technology revolution is that, mainly without thinking about it, we have given up “locational privacy.” Even in low-tech days, our movements were not entirely private. The desk attendant at my gym might have recalled seeing me, or my colleagues might have remembered when I arrived. Now the information is collected automatically and often stored indefinitely.

Privacy advocates are rightly concerned. Corporations and the government can keep track of what political meetings people attend, what bars and clubs they go to, whose homes they visit. It is the fact that people’s locations are being recorded “pervasively, silently, and cheaply that we’re worried about,” the Electronic Frontier Foundation said in a recent report.

People’s cellphones and E-ZPasses are increasingly being used against them in court. If your phone is on, even if you are not on a call, you may be able to be found (and perhaps picked up) at any hour of the day or night. As disturbing as it is to have your private data breached, it is worse to think that your physical location might fall into the hands of people who mean you harm.

This decline in locational privacy, from near-absolute to very little in just a few years, has not generated much outrage, or even discussion.

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That is partly because so much of it is a side-effect of technology that people like. Drivers love E-ZPasses. G.P.S. enables all sorts of cool smart phone applications, from driving directions and find-a-nearby-restaurant features to the ever-popular “Take Me to My Car.”

And people usually do not know that they are being monitored. The transit authority does not warn buyers that their MetroCards track their subway use (or that the police have used the cards in criminal investigations). Cameras that follow people on the street are placed in locations that are hard to spot.

It is difficult for cellphone users to know precisely what information their devices are sending about their current location, when they are doing it, and where that information is going. Some privacy advocates were upset by recent reports that the Palm Pre, which has built-in G.P.S., has a feature that regularly sends its users’ location back to Palm without notifying them at the time.

What can be done? As much as possible, location-specific information should not be collected in the first place, or not in personally identifiable form. There are many ways, as the Electronic Frontier Foundation notes, to use cryptography and anonymization to protect locational privacy. To tell you about nearby coffee shops, a cellphone application needs to know where you are. It does not need to know who you are.

When locational information is collected, people should be given advance notice and a chance to opt out. Data should be erased as soon as its main purpose is met. After you pay your E-ZPass bill, there is no reason for the government to keep records of your travel.

The idea of constantly monitoring the citizenry’s movements used to conjure up images of totalitarian states. Now, technology does the surveillance — generally in the name of being helpful. It’s time for a serious conversation about how much of our privacy of movement we want to give up.

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