



Written by [C. Mitchell Shaw](#) on August 10, 2016

Big Data Knows You Better Than You Know Yourself

George Orwell may have imagined a world of total surveillance, but even his fertile imagination and acute understanding of totalitarianism did not foresee a world where the citizens demand, purchase, install, and configure devices to conduct the bulk of the surveillance on themselves and others. He also did not foresee the incestuous — if sometimes less-than-harmonious — relationship between government and business that would bring about the surveillance state. In the digital age, we have a state of total (or near total) surveillance that makes *1984* look like child's play.



In the digital age, there is no line of demarcation between digital privacy and any other privacy, between digital liberty and any other liberty. After all, if you have no choice about the data that is collected on you and who has access to it — including your phone calls, texts, e-mails, browsing history, calendar, and more — can you really be said to be free?

With both overreaching three-letter government agencies and nosy corporations working daily to increase their ability to spy on any and all, the degree to which most residents of planet Earth are spied upon is growing exponentially. And — even more than three years after the Snowden reveal — most of the subjects of that surveillance still have little idea how it works or why it matters. Data-mining and data-analysis work hand-in-hand to create a startlingly accurate picture of the lives of nearly everyone. How accurate are those pictures? Consider this small example from a [previous article](#):

In 2012, a father of a teenage girl saw for himself how powerful this form of information gathering and analysis can be. Several years ago, Target department stores started offering Redcard. It's a credit or debit card that can be used to make purchases at Target stores and on their website. It offers a five-percent discount any time it is used. Target's reason for doing this is simple. It ties all of your purchases together into one profile for data-analysis purposes so that they can send you advertising based on not just what you buy, but what their data analysis tells them you are going to buy. How effective is it? The father of that teenager stormed into a store outside Minneapolis and demanded to know why his daughter was receiving advertisements for baby clothes, baby furniture, and diapers. After all, she is still in high school. The manager said he would look into it and call the father in a day or so. When he called two days later, the father said that he had talked with his daughter and learned that she was, indeed, pregnant. Target figured it out before her own father did.

Now, if Target was able to accurately predict a teenage pregnancy based only on subtle changes in purchasing habits at their stores, what could be known by compiling and analyzing *all* of the data on *all* of the purchases, e-mail, texts, phone calls, travel, browsing history, calendar entries, and more on *all* people? The answer to that question is both important and startling. It is important because that degree



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of data-mining and data-analysis is real and happens every day. It is startling because it means that those who conduct the mining and analysis know everything there is to know about the people whose data they collect and analyze. In fact, since data-analysis uses cold, hard math — instead of emotion — to arrive at conclusions, those who use it know the subjects of surveillance better than those people know themselves.

One company involved in the business of compiling digital dossiers on every living person is IDI. What sets this company apart from the others is that it has “already built a profile on every American adult, including young people who wouldn’t be swept up in conventional databases, which only index transactions,” according to a [report](#) by *Bloomberg*. Chief Executive Officer Derek Dubner told *Bloomberg* that, whereas most databases would miss some young people (because they still live at home and have not purchased things such as cars and houses and do not have utilities registered in their names), his company is able to get the data on them by looking at other data points.

Most of IDI’s customers are either private investigators or government agencies. The one-year-old company is also targeting consumer marketers. Big Data is big money. By selling information on prospective consumers to companies with something to market to those prospective consumers and then using the profits to buy up other companies with huge data-bases, IDI hopes to have even more data on all of the planet’s inhabitants to sell to investigators, government agencies, and consumer marketers. *Bloomberg* reports that IDI has recently acquired two other companies and their data-bases. In December of 2015, IDI purchased Fluent — a company focused on marketing profiles — for \$100 million. That acquisition included Fluent’s data-base of 120 million U.S. consumers. Then in June, IDI paid \$21 million in stocks to take ownership of Q Interactive — an advertising platform with its own data-base.

While companies such as Google, Apple, and Facebook continue to decry the evils of government surveillance, it appears that the real motive behind Big Data’s resistance to that government surveillance is monetary. There are untold billions of dollars to be made by controlling and manipulating the data that on one hand is produced by our actions and on the other hand influences those actions.

And consider this: Government surveillance is the illegitimate offspring of corporate surveillance. Washington did not invent the devices and technologies that are used to gather and transmit the minute and personal details of our lives; Silicone Valley did. Since then — for the mere sake of convenience — a growing number of consumers have adopted each new wave of those technologies without much thought to the types or amount of data being given away.

Bloomberg’s article ends with a quote from Steve Rambam, the PI who hosts the *Investigation Discovery* channel’s *Nowhere to Hide*. Rambam highlighted the power of data — particularly consumer data — by saying, “I know it’s Thursday, you haven’t eaten Chinese food in two weeks, and I know you’re due.”

The reality, though, is even more ominous than Rambam’s statement would indicate. Since both corporations and government agencies have compiled titanic amounts of data on everyone on the planet and since they have the technology to sort and analyze that data at their convenience, they know all of your habits, your schedule, your likes and dislikes, and what those things mean. They know all of that about all of your friends, as well. Because of this and the ability to psychoanalyze the ways in which you create data (such as writing web-based e-mail), they can know with near certainty that later today you will get an e-mail or text from a friend who will ask you to meet next week for coffee after work. They



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already know that you will agree and when and where you will meet. They even know what you will order and what surprise news your friend has for you.

Technology is both cold and calculating. It knows no loyalties. That can work *against* you or *for* you. It works *against* you when — out of either ignorance or complacency — you allow data on the *core of who you are* to be collected and transmitted outside of your control. It works *for* you when you begin to harness the power of that same technology to protect your privacy and liberty. The same technologies used by Ed Snowden when he communicated with journalists to leak the data on the NSA's unconstitutional (and likely illegal) mass surveillance program is [available](#) — free of cost — to any and all who will take the time to learn to use it.

Now is the time for those concerned about privacy and liberty in the digital age to learn to protect them. The next generation will inherit not only those technologies, but the attitudes of this generation about them. What one generation accepts, the next expects.



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