

Watchful eye: Omniscience refinements

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [November 13, 2007](#) issue

Each time “someone clicks on a Web page, makes a phone call, uses a credit card, or checks in with a microchipped pass at work, that person leaves a data trail that can later be tracked. Every day, billions of bits of such personal data are stored, sifted, analysed, cross-referenced . . . to build up profiles to predict possible future behaviour” (the *Economist*, September 29, “Learning to Live with Big Brother”). Can we escape? Never. “America . . . has an estimated 30 m[illion] surveillance cameras. . . . Every Briton can expect to be caught on camera on average some 300 times a day.”

Should this terrify us? According to the *Economist*, few people mind the intrusion. What is more, many of us welcome surveillance, which we are told is a protecting instrument in a time of terror.

The increase in technological sophistication and public bewilderment has led to nonchalance among all but the professional worriers and guardians on the civil liberties front. It was not always that way.

Many an adult who was brought up religiously will remember being threatened with the data stored in the divine brain behind God’s all-seeing eye, as pictured on the Great Seal and the dollar bill. In a footnote to the doctrine of divine omniscience, God was called the cosmic snoop who goes everywhere you go. This God, said parents and pastors who were frustrated because their snooping range was limited and their eyesight poor so their kids got away with stuff, was waiting to whomp you. So be good. Eventually people yawned, however, because punishment for the behavior turned up by such data was left for a future life.

Omniscience refinement number two, which we thought had been left behind, is enrapturing millions today. When Billy Graham published *World Aflame* in 1965, I reviewed it in the Sunday *New York Herald-Tribune*. I remember being awed that the evangelist was “up on” technology. He wrote that skeptics always asked him how

God could take care of billions of people on Judgment Day. Graham admitted that in olden days the arithmetic of judging billions was daunting, but with television God could assemble under the camera's eye all who were living or had lived and use scales of justice and an adding machine to assess all.

All along there was also Santa, who knew whether each child was naughty or nice. Children should have trembled, but they saw the plot—Attila the Santa Claus filled the stockings of bad kids alongside the almost-as-bad nice kids. So another generation yawned and feared neither God nor Santa. “Few seem[ed] to mind.”

Then George Orwell in *1984* envisioned Big Brother snooping, for malign purposes, to control populations. His book became a best seller, and *Orwellian* entered the vocabulary. But 1984 came and went, and few seemed to care.

At the root of the God-as-vengeful-scorekeeping-snoop image was the mixed message of texts such as Psalm 139: “O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.” *My thoughts!* That went a bit further into the surveillance zone, since the data-gathering instruments of today are not yet efficient on that score. Perhaps implanted RFIDS, or radio-frequency identification microchips, will take care of that. After all, in a time of terror, surveillance becomes our friend, God seems distant, Santa is semiretired, Orwell forgotten.

The *Economist*: “But imagine what sort of state may emerge as the best brains of a secret police force—a force whose house culture treats all dissent as dangerous—perfects the art of gathering and using information on massive computer brains, not yellowing paper.”