

Daily

Opinion

The Daily Campus

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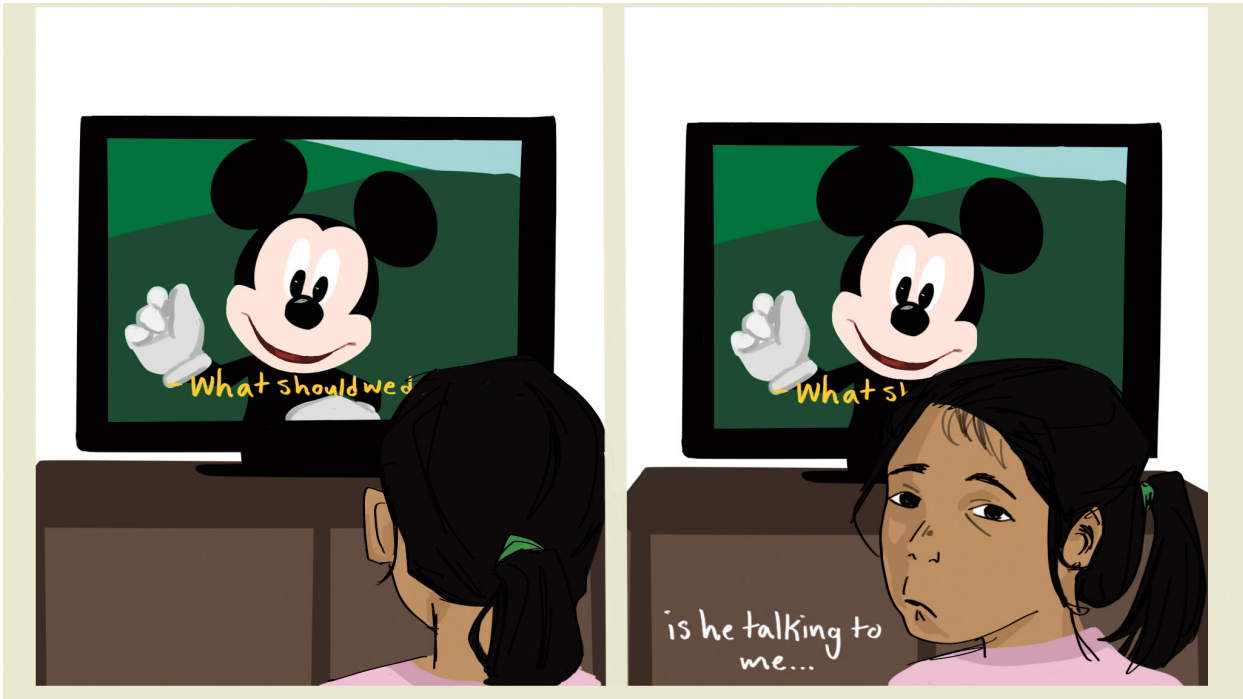


PHOTO BY GOSETTE ELLIS, STAFF ARTIST/THE DAILY CAMPUS

Smile! You’re on Camera

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There was once a time where being alone in public was possible. I implore you to try a small test: stop reading for just a moment and look around the room. Look at the ceiling, look at the walls, look at the door. Do you see a camera?

A phone on a desk could be recording, your laptop has a lens above its screen, and even a doorbell outside may watch who comes and goes. You may not see a camera, but that doesn't mean one cannot see you.

Surveillance has become increasingly common: cameras now sit on streetlights, storefronts, parking lots and private homes. This network of observation will only continue to grow. Police departments across the United States have deployed automated license plate readers that scan passing vehicles, storing records of where they appear. State governments have partnered with corporations like Flock Safety, linking cameras across the nation to track the movement of cars in real time. As of recent estimates, more than 87,000 of these cameras operate across 48 states.

Using this technology, details of our everyday life are recorded: where we drive, when we move and how often we pass through certain places. Residents cannot

consent to the collection of this data, and what's been created is a digital checkpoint system across the U.S. The message is simple: you are being watched.

Constant observation leads to changes in how we behave as a species. Psychologists refer to the Hawthorne effect, a phenomenon characterized by the changes in behavior when people know they are being watched. The presence of surveillance does not need to be obvious for this effect to occur; the possibility alone is enough. When people believe their actions may be observed, they begin to adjust themselves: avoiding strange or unconventional behavior, or neutralizing an opinion. We act in ways that appear acceptable to an imagined audience. Over time, this pressure produces a form of control, where surveillance does not need to punish every act of deviation. It only needs to create the sense that punishment is a possibility. In such an environment, individuality begins to shrink as people self-monitor.

This environment erodes the human spirit. Humans are naturally expressive creatures: we create art, tell jokes, dance badly, sing off-key and laugh too loud. Our cultures flourish with freedom and experimentation. When we believe we may be watched, recorded, judged, or punished, we suppress the strange and imperfect parts of ourselves. Our identities become calculated, and

instead of individuals freely exploring who we are, people begin to resemble a crowd of careful performers, each adjusting their behavior for an unseen audience.

A watched society produces obedient people. Constant surveillance is a powerful tool for control, as it removes the need for open force. Instead of relying on punishment, systems of supervision encourage people to adjust themselves before punishment ever becomes necessary. The government and the corporations developing this technology do so with one goal in mind: to get people to obey.

This is why mass surveillance appears so often in authoritarian states. Researchers and organizations warn that its expansion has become a defining feature of modern authoritarianism. Surveillance allows authority to extend their reach far beyond what traditional policing can achieve, and the implications of this power become especially dangerous in the period of political instability and conflict that we're currently facing. When people know their movements can be tracked and their speech recorded, they become hesitant to openly challenge injustice. Citizens are losing their voices with their privacy.

As George Orwell wrote, "If you can feel that staying human is worthwhile, even when it can't have any result whatever, you've beaten them." Yes, I'm quoting



A photograph of a street camera. Cameras in public have become more common, sparking concerns over privacy.
PHOTO COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

"1984," but how could I not? In these increasingly Orwellian times, the victory this excerpt describes is something we all must hold to heart.

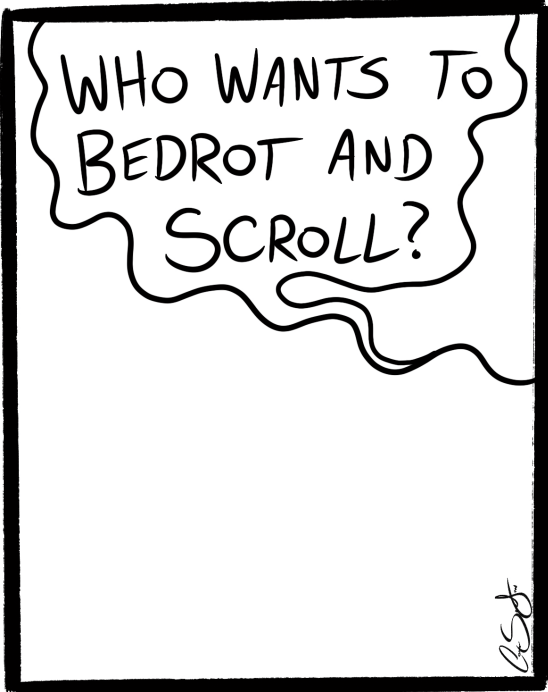
Systems of surveillance depend on the promise that we conform. They rely on your ignorance, your not caring, that everything you do is being monitored. Whether you like it or not, your behavior will change. You will speak softer, choose the safe opinion instead of the honest one, and over time, the strange edges

of humanity will begin to disappear, having been sanded down by the pressure of being watched.

Staying human is the ultimate form of resistance. A society built on constant observation hopes we forget that. Laugh loudly, sing to the heavens and voice your opinion. Surveillance works best when we shrink ourselves, so make yourself giant.

If that thought makes you uncomfortable, good. That's the problem. After all, someone might be watching.

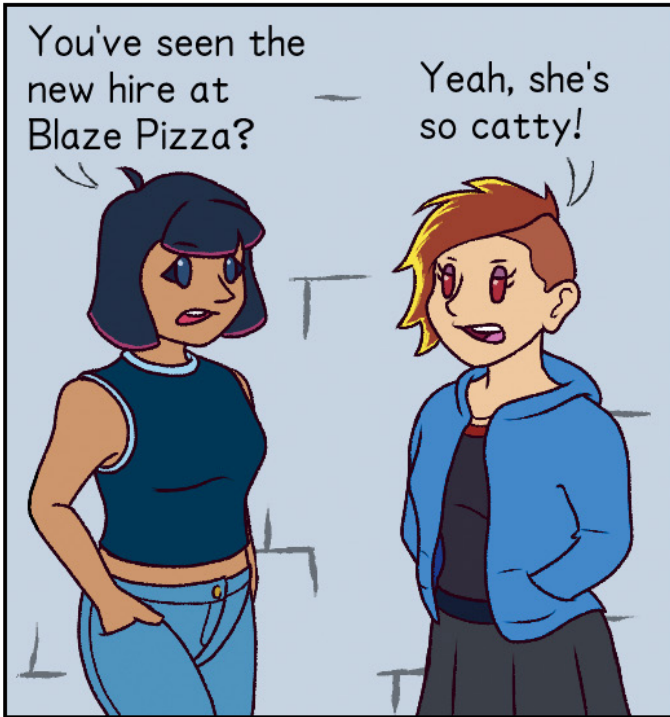
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