Surveillance a part of everyday life

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Details of casual conversations and a comprehensive store of 'deleted' information were just some of what Victoria University of Wellington students found during a project to uncover what records companies keep.

For an assignment in third-year media studies course 'Media, Technologies and Surveillance', lecturer Dr Kathleen Kuehn asked students to request personal data reports under the New Zealand Privacy Act from two to three companies of their choosing. Companies approached included TradeMe, FlyBuys, One Card, social media sites,

banks and health agencies.

"I wanted the students to analyse how they participate in different types or modes of surveillance in their everyday lives, and get them thinking about why privacy matters," says Dr Kuehn.

Although students were aware that information was stored about them for marketing purposes, some findings surprised them. One student was shocked to read in her gym file, detailed notes on conversations she'd had with the receptionist, including information on her boyfriend and stress she'd been experiencing about exams. Another student found that Facebook had kept a list of all the people she'd ever friended or claimed to be in a relationship with long after she'd deleted that information. Likewise, a student found TradeMe Jobs stored information such as CVs and cover letters for a period of time after they had been 'deleted'.

Dr Kuehn says that putting just a few reports together provides a fairly comprehensive picture of people's daily lives. "It wouldn't be hard to know incredibly detailed information about me and my day just by combining my Snapper card, Eftpos and iPhone app data, for example," says Dr Kuehn.

One student remarked that the project had been an eye opener, as it showed how so much of what people say and do is recorded in today's 'internet age', and how personal information collected is used to evaluate individuals.

Categorising people based on data collected about them can actually limit their opportunities, warns Dr Kuehn. For instance, she says, while some may welcome the approach of using software to scan CVs in order to personalise and improve the relevance of job advertisements presented to them, it can also restrict people's knowledge about certain jobs.

"How are the life chances of one young person who receives targeted ads or promotional content for prestigious universities constructed differently for, say, someone who comes from a lower income neighbourhood who might receive ads for trade schools or apprenticeship programmes instead?

"If I change my settings from 'female' to 'male' on Facebook, my targeted ads change from ads about cookbooks and luxury cruises to ads about luxury cars, information about earning a tax refund and an advertisement for a career advice workshop. This not only reinforces gender norms, but also gives the 'male version' of myself a competitive advantage in the marketplace."

Paradoxically, one of Dr Kuehn's students, Philippa Cole, commented that subverting surveillance in order to protect privacy is futile and can even be detrimental.

"Collecting information on people and evaluating them, whether for marketing purposes, job screening or friendship has become so normalised that to not be 'on the grid' could be deemed suspicious," says Philippa.

"For instance, if a prospective employer cannot find me on LinkedIn they may assume I'm not technically proficient or market savvy, and not worth the risk.

"The use of surveillance is often critiqued in relation to the erosion of privacy issues, invariably invoking the 'nothing to hide, nothing to worry about' debate. This debate only serves to reinforce, justify and extend existing power dynamics, rendering surveillance as a normal and inevitable part of life."