

How technology turns consumers into spies

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Digital tools increasingly compel us to spend time and energy monitoring other people, from our own children or ailing parents to the workers preparing our pizza, a new study says.

The paper, "The Surveillant Consumer," explores how people are turned into spies by the ubiquity of digital cameras or other [surveillance](#)

[technology](#), combined with marketing messages that suggest they're bad parents or ill-informed consumers if they don't use them.

"There's a lot of research about the consumer as the target of surveillance, but less focus on how the consumer becomes the surveillor herself, and how these products encourage the consumer to do those things," said co-author Karen Levy, assistant professor of information science. "Consumers are sold a sense of anxiety about the world, some of which is based in fact, some of which is less so. You want to know where your child is, but it can become a slippery slope."

Even well-intended surveillance can erode privacy in personal spaces and mimic the monitoring done by companies or governments, Levy said. It also disproportionately impacts those who are less powerful, whether within family relationships or society more broadly.

The paper, written with lead author Luke Stark, then of Dartmouth College, and published July 25 in *Media, Culture and Society*, focuses on three types of surveillance: over loved ones; over companies and their workers; and over household employees such as nannies.

Young [children](#) can be monitored with a wide array of items, such as smart diapers that analyze whether a child is dehydrated or has a urinary tract infection, or a Barbie doll that engages children in recorded conversations that parents can listen to later, according to the study. For older children, parents can install devices on cars that track where they go and how fast they drive; and cameras in the homes of aging parents can alert caregivers when they need help.

Forms of monitoring are built into companies such as Uber and Airbnb, where users are expected to provide reviews and feedback of their drivers or hosts. With Domino's Pizza Tracker tool, customers can track the status of their pizza order at every step of the process and send

instant messages to the people preparing their food.

This not only puts [consumers](#) into surveillance roles, it relieves companies of some of the cost and hassle of monitoring workers themselves, Levy said.

"Now the worker is responsible to a manager and also to you, who just bought a \$9 pizza," she said. "It puts the worker in a different position, and it puts you in a position where you are encouraged to tell your Uber drivers how much you love them as a component of the transaction."

Items such as nanny cams and websites like [nannysightings.com](#), where anyone can report the behavior of a nanny they've observed, are aimed at ensuring children are safe, but they also exacerbate the unequal power dynamics between parents and their generally lower-income household employees, the study says.

The growing familiarity of surveillance tools threatens to make people – particularly children – more comfortable with increasingly invasive levels of monitoring, said Levy, who is also an associate faculty member at the Law School.

"The whole idea, if you look at marketing materials, is to make surveillance warm and fuzzy. And I do think that is dangerous," she said. "People who grow up under conditions where they don't feel as though they have privacy in their homes or in intimate spaces may be more likely to accept that as the norm in other contexts."

More information: Luke Stark et al. The surveillant consumer, *Media, Culture & Society* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0163443718781985](https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443718781985)

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