Book review: 'Networks of Control'

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In many ways, "Networks of Control (http://www.facultas.at/2016/networksofcontrol?): A Report on Corporate Surveillance, Digital Tracking, Big Data & Privacy," by Wolfie Christl and Sarah Spiekermann, is the perfect Halloween read.

It's focused on the "scope of corporate surveillance, digital tracking and of the business models in place today." Christl and Spiekermann make pains to emphasize that their work is not merely focused on the "big S" government surveillance revealed, in part, by Edward Snowden, but also the corporate practice of collecting data for business. If it's less about the government, that seems harmless enough, right?

Wrong.

As both Christl and Spiekermann are quick to acknowledge, things go from mundane to unsettling really fast.

"While we were writing this report and analyzing all the facts for it, we became increasingly appalled," they write. "While both of us have been working on privacy for a while and are aware of what is happening, the pure scale of it has overwhelmed us. We are wondering whether the modern ubiquitous data-driven IT world makes us sacrifice our dignity. The readers of this book shall decide for themselves."

This "beware, all ye who enter here" vibe is initially tempered by an extensive but approachable crash course in big data and collection measures, a welcome, gap-filling foundation-building for a fledgling privacy professional like myself. In that way, this introduction mimics a slow-burning horror film. Set the noose, increase the stakes, make everything appear normal before things ultimately prove to be terrifying.

And it genuinely gets there.

As "Networks of Control" is a longer take on Wolfie Christl's 2014 report, the prose isn't necessarily gripping. It is, after all, an academic takedown of big data and surveillance practices. However, when Christl and Spiekermann let the facts speak from themselves – yikes. This isn't some optimistic foray into the future, as with Gerd Leonhard's "Technology vs. Humanity." (https://iapp.org/news/a/book-review-technology-vs-humanity/) Instead, their study is an urgent warning, a call to arms, a tell-all of how the sausage gets made.

While some of the examples of big data and surveillance are old hat – like the infamous Target-predicting-pregnancy story (http://www.forbes.com/sites/kashmirhill/2012/02/16/how-target-figured-out-a-teen-girl-was-pregnant-before-her-father-did/2/#4201de9771cc) – reading anecdote after exhaustive anecdote of companies and

approachable for a report that boasts over 900 sources.

The work reaches its apex during the author's discussion of the societal implications of all this data collection and surveillance. When you pair their statements like "data richness is [systematically used to discriminate against people (https://iapp.org/news/a/when-surveillance-perpetuates-institutional-racism/)](https://iapp.org/news/a/when-surveillance-perpetuates-institutional-racism/)" with "users are often informed incompletely, inaccurately or not at all about which data is being collected and shared with third parties," how can one not become even a little spooked? There goes free will, all thanks to an algorithm.

Um, duh, Christl and Spiekermann respond.

"We have entered a surveillance society as David Lyon foresaw it already in the early 1990s; a society in which the practices of 'social sorting', the permanent monitoring and classification of the whole population through information technology and software algorithms, have silently become an everyday reality," they write.

After setting the world aflame, the authors are good enough to provide some insights on how to best build it back up. While they advocate for increased corporate transparency and education, they also provide innovative, thought-provoking criticisms and solutions aimed toward propelling humanity towards a better future, ideas that seemed fresh and different, highlighting their impressive understanding of the issues and their tangible fervor for the topics they explore.

Ultimately, "Network of Control" is worth a read. It leaves you smarter with cogs turning, and perhaps just a twinge more paranoid. Maybe that's a good thing.