

Surveillance society

More information than ever is collected by companies about individuals, raising concerns about freedom and privacy.

1 Explain the following words and expressions.

privacy issues	spending habits	surveillance society	glass consumer
loyalty card scheme	tagging	security breach	satellite tracking

2 Scan the article and underline the expressions from exercise 1.

The glass consumer

A new book, 'The glass consumer', claims that Britain has become a 'surveillance society'. It says we have very little control over how companies use our personal data. We provide this data when we use credit cards or mobile phones, often without realising it. Loyalty card schemes allow companies to track individual spending habits; technology means companies can know which web sites their employees visit. Never has data on individuals been so easy to collect.

Of course, there are benefits from all this information gathering. Companies can customise goods and services, and improve competitiveness. Prices can be reduced, as in the example of a UK insurance company which is piloting a new system of 'pay as you drive' insurance. A satellite box fitted in the car is used to calculate the monthly premiums. Now, however, the government has announced its intention to consider such satellite tracking as a way of delivering a national road pricing scheme. Any such 'Pay as you drive' schemes inevitably involve huge privacy issues.

In the retail area, there is a growing use of tagging device to transmit information on staff. Computer systems worn on the arm can be used to monitor how long employees spend on task or the length of breaks! Management claim efficiency is improved, as workers can be told exactly where to pick up goods from the warehouse. Many workers have refused to wear these tags, claiming that their work is being monitored and they are being reduced to the role of machines.

Research reveals that over 80% of people think they have less privacy than ten years ago; nearly 80% think they have lost control over how their personal information is used. These fears seem confirmed by reports that bank account details of 1,000 UK customers, held by Indian call centres, were sold to an undercover reporter and a breach of data security in the US may have exposed 40 million credit-card accounts to a hacker. While there are many benefits for companies to collect information, it can easily be misused. Tagging? Tracking? Are we indeed living in a surveillance society?

3 Read the whole article. Summarise the key points. Have you experienced any of the problems mentioned?

4 Find words and expressions in the article from the following definitions.

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| (a) Information about individuals | (Paragraph 1) |
| (b) To change the way that something looks so that it is exactly what you want or need | (Paragraph 2) |
| (c) Amounts of money that you pay regularly for an insurance policy | (Paragraph 2) |
| (d) Regularly checked in order to find out what is happening | (Paragraph 3) |
| (e) Working or done secretly in order to get secret information | (Paragraph 4) |
| (f) Not protected from attack or from the bad effects of something | (Paragraph 4) |
- (Definitions from or based on *Macmillan English Dictionary Text* © Bloomsbury Publishing Plc 2002)

5 Answer the questions in small groups. Be ready to present your answers to the class.

- Do you know what data has been collected about you by companies? Are you happy with the level of security?
- Should companies 'tag' their employees? Should bosses monitor emails sent by employees?
- What are the pros and cons of governments introducing satellite tracking 'pay as you drive' schemes?
- Do you believe that we live in a surveillance society? Justify your answer.