

Mother of Big Brother

Contributed by Debbie Smit
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Next time you log on to Google Earth, pay a visit to the village of Dalia, Sudan. If you paid attention during primary school geography lessons, you will expect to see a harsh desert landscape dotted with some very hardy scrub. What you might not anticipate is a real-time view of how much more impossible life has become in this already hostile world. Dalia is deserted. All that remains are the pockmarks of burnt out gottia, the traditional dwellings of the people who once lived there, clustered desperately on the red banks of a dry river bed.

See all this and more on Google Earth's Global Awareness layer.

The story has an absurd twist. Ogleearth.com reports that Google Earth, due to US export controls and economic sanctions, has prevented Google Earth from being downloaded in Sudan. The rest of the world can see the destruction from the air, but if you're Sudanese, you must be content with living in it, bearing the brunt of a genocidal regime that is no doubt thankful for the embargo on information.

Fortunately, it is becoming increasingly difficult to constrain information.

In the words of Jamais Cascio, one of the founders of the website, worldchanging.com, the lowly cellphone camera is a "harbinger of massive social transformation". Cascio says that we are in the age of the Participatory Panopticon, where everyone has a responsibility to watch over our planet.

The word "Panopticon" was first used by Jeremy Bentham to describe his design for a eighteenth century prison where all the inmates could be watched and monitored at all times. Bentham's surveillance tool was in the physical architecture of the building. Prisoners did not know whether they were being watched or not, creating a 'sentiment of an invisible omniscience': the Mother of Big Brother.

By contrast, the Participatory Panopticon does not watch from above, it watches from below. It is sousveillant rather than surveillant.

New technology – the web, broadband internet, wireless communication and the cellular telephone – has given us the means to document, record and archive our own history. Simply put, we have the wheel.

You can surreptitiously catch an MP napping in parliament, gather visual evidence on sexual harrassment in the workplace, out a corrupt cop or report on the human cost of war.

To broadcast your findings you don't need a television station – post it online and everyone will be able to see what you see. YouTube has 2,990 results for Darfur. (I must concede though that there are 10,200 results for Virginia Tech...and counting!)

New technology, used in the right way, seems to have a cure for all that ails our planet.

Now you can snap a photo of the bar code on your jar of coffee and get information from a variety of websites on whether the product was produced sustainably and whether the company making it behaved ethically.

You may have had the misfortune this week of being left high and dry (or drenched) by Johannesburg Licensing this week when their newly-installed computer system malfunctioned.

Perhaps you considered (as 702's Jenny Crwys-Williams suggested on one of her shows) documenting your presence there on you cellphone camera as a way of avoiding prosecution for non-payment of your license.

Cascio believes that soon we will be wearing Mike Outmesguine's Junxion Box, a wearable wi-fi hotspot housed in a solar-powered backpack which, combined with wireless webcams will be able to archive the minutiae of our lives and monitor an election