

Who's Watching The Watcher's?

Ross: Welcome to Renegade Inc. We all know that we're being watched, listened to, tracked, traced and monitored. So we have a simple but important question: Who ensures those people in positions of power and those with corporate monopolies remain accountable?

Ross: Peter Bloom, welcome to Renegade Inc. Thank you very much for coming.

Peter Bloom: Thank you very much for inviting me.

Ross: Our viewers watching this know they're being snooped upon, they know that the device in their pocket and all their internet history and all the rest of it, they know that people are watching. Your central question is if the corporate world is watching them, us, then who is watching the corporate world? That's really the central thesis, isn't it, in your book, *Monitored*?

Peter Bloom: Yes. I mean, what I'm really, really interested in are, you know, a central part of it is how come it seems that the more they're monitoring us, the more the tracking us, the less we're willing to monitor and track them.

Ross: And what you want to do is turn the tables?

Peter Bloom: Absolutely.

Ross: Now, if you are going to turn the tables, turns out - I can't stand the word elites, it's just the monopolists. The monopolists, who are heavily invested in Big Tech and algorithms and surveillance capitalism, they don't want the tables turned, do they, because they don't want to be watched?

Peter Bloom: No, absolutely. But I do think that it's not completely under their discretion. And I think you already see this thing through ways in which we use mobile phones in order to better document police brutality to the ways in which we demand through data that we have more accountability around tax and tax evasion, to the everyday ways in which we use this to feel more in control about our health and about our society. So in a sense, I think it's an ongoing struggle that right now I would definitely say monopolists or elites or whatever term you want to use, are winning, but it's one that they have to engage in. And I think that if we're more focused on better understanding how we can turn those tables, how we can use this, not just to protect our privacy, but to undo their privacy, to make them more transparent and not just transparent but accountable, that will also give us the power to be empowered, to create types of data and tracking and monitoring that would lead us towards a more egalitarian society.

Ross: And ultimately lead us towards a flatter hierarchy where you can deploy capital, make quicker decisions, make smarter decisions, as opposed to waiting for the so-called elites to, you know, go and deploy capital on your behalf?

Peter Bloom: Absolutely. I mean, I think the movement towards a more socially distributed form of society is exactly being able to move from one in which we're making real time decisions for the benefit of elites and profit, towards where we are making real-time decisions and information sharing for the benefit of society.

Ross: And do you think that when monopolists hear that, that they're going to embrace it?

Peter Bloom: Well, I think if they hear from me, I'm not sure how threatened they would feel. I wouldn't want to put myself up on that level pedestal. But I think that in a certain way, they don't want to hear that, though I would also be careful about this in the sense that I think they see everything as an opportunity for co-optation, right? You already see this. I mean, look at the ways in which they've moved value frameworks that what used to be just return on investment for profit into we can also then begin to monitor community impacts. A very good example that happened in many ways before the kind of the explosion of ICT technologies, the microcredit movement, right? Like, we're going to give communities around the world, many of whom are underserved, you know, capital in order to, you know, empower themselves. But what this really becomes is another monitoring techniques and other techniques for disciplining and other techniques for exploitation. And you're seeing this now in terms of the movement for banking the unbanked. So things like Mpesa in Kenya, like where we're giving people the ability to have bank accounts just on their phone and they can put money here and there, right? And not only collects massive information about them, not only, you know, really hopes to discipline, monitor and track them, but also shapes, right, the ways in which the desire for inclusion is put in the direction of financial inclusion and entrepreneurship, rather than real serious community-building infrastructure-building, including the types of egalitarian systems that would truly benefit society at large.

Ross: How would you begin to track the elites of the people who are doing the tracking, you know? Who are the watchers watching those who are watching? How would you begin to do that?

Peter Bloom: So, I think that there's a number of different ways you could do it, right? I think one, we're already seeing some of this, but really, really putting out and trying to understand and follow the money, right? Where's the money going? How is the money going now? We've seen some of this, like the Panama Papers, for instance, right? And this is a really good example about not just journalists breaking stories, but actually beginning the process of tracking and monitoring. Now what I find important about that - and I'll go to other examples in a moment - is that we have to go beyond just tracking and just saying, OK, well, you're doing this and we see it, to actually constructing bottom-up forms of popular justice and power and accountability, to say once we've been able to track what you're doing and continually track you, we're also going to continually monitor you to make sure that we're creating a different type of system, that we're holding you accountable. And that step, I think we really need to be able to start moving forward as a thing. I think the other ways in which we are still seeing it is that, you know, look at the social justice movements around authoritarianism and police brutality and militarism. I mean, there's an idea that in a certain sense, oh well, this is relatively new and it's like, no. You know, even in the most quote, unquote, democratic countries, right, you have seen that in order to protect capital, in order to protect elites, in order to protect a systemically racist system, right, there has been massive

forms of illiberalism, massive forms of police brutality, massive forms of using violence. And we're just being able to video it now. We're being able to document it. We're being able to show in a way that the things that you say on your sheet, oh, this person put a gun, wasn't true. So I think in that sense, what you're seeing in a certain aspect is an ability to hold limitly accountable through kind of new monitoring techniques from the bottom up. I would also say, though, that just as we're being monitored in terms of big data to increase our productivity, increase our efficiency, we can also use it in different ways, right? Why couldn't we use big data to have an actual planned economy that worked for everyone? Why couldn't we actually be able to really test and be like, OK, to what extent are you serving, what communities and why? We have the data on this and we can act on it. And I think in this sense, one of the ironies is that they want us to focus on a very liberal way, only on the fact of personal privacy as opposed to focusing actually on yes, it's bad that they're monitoring us. But if they're doing this to us, why couldn't we do it for much more radical and transformative and purposes of emancipation and justice to them?

Ross: So where does this movement start? Does it start grassroots to people, start to understand to people and start to use technology to implement what you've just talked about? How does that begin?

Peter Bloom: So again, I think it happens on several levels. I think on the one hand, it definitely happens grassroots. You've already seen this to a certain extent. I think also in terms of popular movements and popular opinion. So I think the example of the Panama Papers is a great one. The example of things is that to a certain extent, elites have much more trouble justifying things because the popular view about who's paying taxes and why has become so strong. I also think that we have to look at the actual points of contradiction in capitalism in our system. So one of the key ones is the fact that actually a lot of local authorities, right wing or left wing political, they are saying, we need this data. Why? Because of austerity, we're not getting any money, right? These are cost centres. They're costing us massive amounts of money. Whether I'm a Tory, whether I'm Labour, whatever like, I still necessarily have to deal with the fact that homelessness is rising.

Ross: So what you're saying, and that is actually that data takes the politics out of it because that is the hard data and we either to react to that or not?

Peter Bloom: There's a certain part of that, but it's also about the kind of data we want to collect. And that's a key part as well, right? So if we just collect data about productivity, if you just collect data about efficiency, if we continue to use algorithms that have systemic biases towards, that's going to give us the results we want, right? Then to a certain extent, one of the things that has happened with big data that is they've been able to - and with monitoring and tracking - is like, you know, they hit every nail with the hammer that they want. But we have to begin saying, what is the hammer that we want? And there's a lot of different ideas and things out there, right? But it's like, as you've said, it's about finding those spaces in which they can be worked on, tried out, and also that you can create popular movements about the community level, national level and international level to push them forward. And again, that doesn't happen overnight, but it is something that I think would be very important.

Ross: We talked at the beginning of this about reasons. Now it might be very obvious to everybody why everyone is being tracked and so forensically, but just go through that sort of top three reasons why the elites are so keen to keep an eye on us.

Peter Bloom: One, insatiable profit. I mean, this is a market, and I think this is the thing. If the 20th century was about, you know, invading new lands, so to speak and giving research explanations, I think people really should take on you are the resource. Things like Metaverse that is being put out by a thing, that's all about knowing your preferences and mining your data.

Ross: And serving whatever to that. And so people are the product?

Peter Bloom: People are the product.

Ross: So 20th century we go far flung places, invade, take the resources and thank you very much. And now these tech companies have turned on their people which is why these services are all free.

Peter Bloom: Exactly. Because you're producing their profit, right? And one of the movements that is happening and this is something that we talk about a bit in Monitored, but it's worth checking is like you should be able to track how much individual profit you're making for this. How much is your data? And you can either say, I don't want to give my data or if I am giving my data, why am not getting some of this profit?

Ross: Show me the money.

Peter Bloom: I think the second thing that is that it allows for a predictability about people's actions, which allows for all sorts of regulating and guiding of people's behaviour. And you already saw this even within like, I find it very interesting, but like in some of the kind of, you know, centre left centre right things like Obama, for instance, I mean, their big economic thing was about nudging people. Now that's a key thing like we're going to nudge people in certain directions. But what this really points to is the fact that we are going to use a whole range of data to discipline and guide and manipulate individual behaviour, in particular directions.

Ross: But there's no such thing as nudge is there. Because basically, what nudge is, if you're going to unpack that word, is using all that data that you've given and you've accepted all those terms and all those social media platforms, and then they use that data to quote, unquote, manage democracy.

Peter Bloom: Yes. I mean, I think that's the big thing that that what you see is the ability to try to use, whether it's in a workplace, whether it's in population, to get people to go in certain directions. You know, I think that the notion of this kind of Orwellian world, is something that I'd like us to shift from from a certain extent, just for the fact that I think increasingly what we've seen is the ability to fully monitor people or monitor people as much as possible, is less in the direction of full overt control and more in a direction of making people think that the choices that they're making are autonomous.

Ross: So, we've got two. So we've got the first one, which is obviously a huge market and the commercial aspect of it. So you keep serving up to people's choices because they can flog them the latest widget. The second thing is nudging them, managing democracy, right, whatever that is. What's the third thing?

Peter Bloom: I think the third one is really being able to kind of weaponize and militarise data. And I think this is the movement, it's something that I'm writing now from the military industrial complex to the authoritarian financial complex. And I think that the more you deregulate markets, the more that you have hyper-capitalism, the more you ironically need to control people, whether that's at a national level, and you've seen this in the 1980s. I mean, you had to move from creating these kind of military invasions to things like Pinochet, which was we're going to put in a neoliberal agenda and we're going to, you know, make sure that it's quite authoritarian to get it through, to now on this individual level, like we have to make sure right that people are making the correct financial decisions, that people are making the decisions that are not going to be challenging. And I think in a certain way that's also interesting is that it's quite real time, right? So in a certain sense, it's not so much a tradition of we're just going to incarcerate people. It's more about actually better understanding what it is that the status quo can maintain, co-opt, incorporate, but also what it needs to repress and discourage. And some of this from a level, you know, goes to straight economics like, we're going to be selling you big data surveillance technology, while some of it is in terms of being able to co-opt things like rehabilitating people, right? So moving them actually from jail to rehabilitation. Some of it is actually in kind of getting people to pay for their own rehabilitation in terms of personal improvement in their own lives, right? So this is a kind of new age capitalism. And all of this is around the ways in which you profit off of making states and individuals and companies resilient, right? In an age of capitalist crisis, we are using big data to profit and promote various forms of resiliency. And that's what this is, in many ways. It's about real time understandings of how do we ensure at every level that our system, whether it's at an individual, organisational or state level, is resilient.

Ross: Peter, welcome back. Second half. Monitored: Business and Surveillance in a time of Big Data. You wrote it. It's our book of the week. Pitch it to us.

Peter Bloom: I would say that probably the best reason to read it is because I do think that it's a very good book about better understanding, not just the technicalities of how you're being monitored, the underlining ideologies of it, how it's changing power and the ways. I would also say it gives a point of reflection about how are you, even when you think you're being critical, kind of actually becoming a monitored subject. How are these ideas infiltrating the ways in which you think and the ways in which you envision change?

Ross: Monitored: Business and Surveillance in a time of Big Data published by Pluto Press, by Peter Bloom. It's our book of the week. In the first half, what we talked about, what we set up, were all the headwinds, all the challenges. You're really kicking at an open door because people know that they're being watched, they just don't know what to do about it. So in this half, tell us what we should do about it.

Peter Bloom: Well, I think that one, we can think about this from a point of view of trying to understand how you can go from kind of what I would say, oppressive tracking or tracking

that is quite disciplining and that is often about monitoring you as an individual or as part of an organisation or part of a country for very particular capitalist purposes, for very particular militaristic and authoritarian purposes, to trying to understand how you would use this in a way that actually allows for us to hold elites accountable and in the long-term move from a society where we have elites. And I think that's a really exciting part.

Ross: Is that not incredibly utopian?

Peter Bloom: It is utopian, potentially, but it's also happening. I think the point is is that the possibilities, I wouldn't say, are endless, but a relatively expensive, it's about - and you mentioned this at the beginning, Ross - to have the willingness to understand why elites are narrowing the possibilities for this because it's in their own interest to do so. They want to use this just for kind of their own profit, and understanding the ways in which you can challenge this so that you can actually explore and experiment with using these technologies so that you move from a society that is being monitored, so to speak, to a society which are using data for something that is much more empowering, much more emancipatory.

Ross: When you talk about the narrowing of optionality, is that narrowing done because of the profit motive?

Peter Bloom: Absolutely. I mean, there's a lot of money to be made, right?

Ross: So if you keep funnelling people down into that sales channel or whatever they call it, in some dreadful marketing agency somewhere, then ultimately you can collect more tickets, you can charge more for it. It's a monopoly position.

Peter Bloom: 100 percent, right? Like, if we can better understand how to market people and turn them into the producers of their own marketing expectation as consumers, the more money there is, yeah.

Ross: So the question there is, can you withhold that tide? Because what you're saying is with open source programming, with all the code that's out there, all the brains, ultimately that dam is going to break, isn't it? Or have they got such a monopoly that ultimately you've just got to tow the line?

Peter Bloom: It would be ironic for this interview, given the book, I wouldn't want to be overly predictive because I think that it can go in in a lot of different directions. And I think that it's going to go kind of in both ways. You've already seen this. I mean now collaboration, open source kind of innovation is, you know, the new fad, right? But it does show something very serious that they realise, like, you know, at the certain sense, traditional notions of intellectual property rights are largely disintegrating, right?

Ross: But at the same time, paradoxically, all the returns to property rights, whether it be real estate, IP patents, whatever it is, they've never been higher.

Peter Bloom: Exactly.

Ross: So is that a moment?

Peter Bloom: These are exactly the points we've seen. Look at these linchpins. And I think the vaccines has been very interesting in this in that this has actually opened up what is traditionally a very important but potentially somewhat esoteric debates about intellectual property and patents and said, Wait a minute, why aren't we licencing this so anyone can make this in a controlled, safe way? Who's actually profiting on this, right? Why is it that we continue to have variants when we could just be having mass production of vaccines and stopping this at various levels of the source?

Achal Prabhala clip: Monopolies on medicines have been affecting us ever since about 1996. They've been affecting the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe even before that. But they became a global phenomenon, a mandatory global phenomenon, since the creation of the World Trade Organisation. And the really insidious thing about medicine monopolies is that they need not exist. That's not the only way we have to incentivise the production of new pharmaceuticals. When the COVID pandemic hit, it hit us hard because the vaccine monopolies that exist now, even today, are supercharged monopolies. On one level, they're monopolies of intellectual property, things like patents, but at another they're also monopolies over the technology, how you make these vaccines. And the problem with these vaccine monopolies is that they're so dense, so complex and so powerful that they're physically restricting who can get them in the world. One of the problems with pharmaceutical monopolies and vaccine monopolies, and the fact that nothing has been done to undo them, is that this pandemic has prolonged and we have new variants like Omicron. And what Omicron in turn has meant for us is that the vaccines that we thought were useful are now less useful. And in fact, mRNA technology that's widespread in the West, turns out to be the only enduring vaccine technology that can withstand Omicron and then be reworked and reformulated for whatever it is to come, including Omicron. The problem with mRNA technology is that the vaccines from BioTech and Pfizer and Moderna are almost unavailable anywhere else in the world outside the West. The companies say, look, no one can make these vaccines, this is such new technology, it's really complicated. In fact, there are over 100 companies in developing countries. A report that I worked on, actually, that identifies exactly who could make these vaccines. We could have billions of these vaccines. We could see an end to this pandemic if those companies around the world were allowed to make the vaccines their countries need. The irony of this is that Moderna was literally created with US taxpayer money from the American government. The BioTech vaccine was created from German taxpayer money. All of these vaccines - BioTech, Pfizer and Moderna - have benefited from tens of billions of dollars of further investments from Western countries to buy those vaccines at a highly profitable price, right? And what's happening in return is that these very societies who funded these vaccines are not actually benefiting from them as much as they could because the vaccines are restricted to other parts of the world who are then creating variants that are coming back to make those vaccines less effective. And so if we abandon this idea that we need philanthropy and capital and good intentions to send vaccines to people who can't afford them and who can make them, and instead understood very clearly that everyone can make these vaccines and every continent around the world. But we just merely must allow them to and encourage them to, that would be a far better way of thinking of the end of this pandemic.

Ross: Take Baltimore as an example. We made a film and put Baltimore in it. We did a case study after 2008. If you follow the money in Baltimore, there's one bank that comes up every time and it's a bank called Wells Fargo and they were giving loans to anybody. They'd give it to a cat as long as the cat had the ability to sign a piece of paper, you know. It was that bad. It was the Wild West in Baltimore. And turns out, if you go to downtown Baltimore and you give people who don't have any access to credit, lots of credit, they're going to take it. Now, if you go back to those neighbourhoods in Baltimore and look at them, tracking them, data and all the rest of it, the amount of collateral damage that that one organisation has done in that area under the guise of being the good guys and trying to help out and growth and all the rest of it, is astronomical. So what are you saying that with Monitored, you know, if we read the book and then say, well, actually, what we want to do is turn the tables and start looking at organisations like Wells Fargo? Is that what you're getting at?

Peter Bloom: Absolutely. How do we monitor, how do we track, those who are unmonitored? And I think that it's very interesting in a certain sense what you've just said, because you've captured a really important dynamic of how we are monitored subjects. You make people feel they want to be monitored by something like easy credit because they're responding to a crisis in capitalism, right? And they're saying, Oh, well, this is a way, but once you do that you're placing an entire set of systems and frameworks that are there to track, monitor and exploit you, not just you, but your community with very little care, actually, for the ultimately human cost of this. And I think what I'm trying to do in part in Monitored is to again, like you said, turn that table. So I would say that Monitored would try to understand this from three levels. On the one level is accountability. How do we monitor the unmonitored? The second is how do we create new frameworks of monitoring that would be actually more appropriate to a different type of system that better serves the needs of people, right?

Ross: Because you're asking the right questions at the top as opposed to how much?

Peter Bloom: Exactly.

Ross: Third?

Peter Bloom: And the third is how do we in many ways deprogram ourselves to go from being subjects that are monitored in terms of like, I always even if I get a house I have to think about like, what's the property value or this or that, to a situation in which we're actually beginning to think about what would be different ways in which I would try to track the benefits that this could have that isn't just value for money, isn't just return on investment?

Ross: When you talk about Jeremy Bentham's unrealised design for total institution and allowing a single warder to then monitor everybody else, what you're actually saying is that's the logical conclusion if we continue down this track?

Peter Bloom: I think so. But I think it's also much more decentralised in a certain sense.

Ross: Right. But it isn't utopian, it's actually pragmatic. What you're saying is if you turn the tables on that, then suddenly the shoe's on the other foot?

Peter Bloom: Absolutely. And I think that's a really key point about, you know, one of the first steps that you can have in this kind of - and Foucault obviously says this very clearly - but what I would like to say is, you know, for even someone like Foucault, the technology is all about self-discipline. all about how one is surveilled and how one disciplines themselves, even if they don't know if they're actually being watched, it's just the assumption of being watched. I would actually want to take it radically one step further and say I think this also shapes how we monitor ourselves, right, not just disciplining ourselves in our everyday actions, but monitor what we believe is possible. But also then what if we turn to let's actually see who's watching us, and let's see also how this changes the notion of what surveillance is, because this is a very good example. We can think that a warden is actually watching us, but maybe there's a whole range of different technologies watching us. And what are the possibilities for tracking them? But then also utilising them potentially for monitoring and tracking elites and then creating a system in which we don't have elites and we track and monitor things in a much more egalitarian way.

Ross: I mean, we're not there.

Peter Bloom: We're not there. No, no, we're not there.

Ross: But you fleshed out a vision of it. It's a hell of a mountain to climb.

Peter Bloom: It is, but I think it's one of the ones that we have to climb.

Ross: Peter Bloom, thank you very much for your time.

Peter Bloom: Thank you, Ross.

Ross: That's it from Renegade Inc. this week. You can drop the team a mail - studio@renegadeinc.com. Join us next week for more insight from those people who are thinking differently. But until then, stay curious.