

FINANCIAL POST MAGAZINE

You're being followed: New digital tracking technologies keep tabs on your every move



ARMINA LIGAYA | May 7, 2014 2:10 PM ET
More from Armina Ligaya | @arminaligaya



There's a growing sense among Canadians that their ability to protect their personal information is diminishing.

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Rap star Jay Z last came to Toronto in January and his concert at Air Canada Centre was packed, drawing thousands of fans to the arena in the downtown core. To gauge the success of this concert by the hip-hop mogul of "Empire State of Mind" and Beyonce-spouse fame, promoters in the past would have typically relied on the estimated attendance, while nearby businesses could look at how flush their cash registers were by night's end.

Now, thanks to the ubiquitous cellphone, Toronto-based company Viasense Inc. can figure out that roughly 13,000 people filled the stands, but they also know how much time concertgoers spent at the show, where they went before and after, and where they ultimately spent the night. Viasense doesn't know the concertgoers' names or what they look like, but the marketing and analytics company can recognize the unique identifier linked to the cellphones people carry and trace their paths. "We were able to see exactly the makeup of the audience," says Mossab Basir, founder and CEO of Viasense.

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Location data silently emitted by the cellphones, smartphones and other electronic devices most of us carry throughout the day has triggered a new gold rush for marketers who want to harness it and for companies that covet the insights it can provide. The patterns of places a person, even if nameless, frequents can reveal plenty. Their pathways can paint a picture of a yogi with a penchant for gambling or a busy parent ferrying children to school, hockey and ballet. It can also shed light on traffic patterns through a mall, or inside a store or airport to help improve services.

Privacy and consumer advocates say we're moving into uncharted territory, and it's possible that in the future we will know where everyone is, and was, at all times. This may have far-reaching implications that we and the law are not yet prepared to deal with. And the practice is only going to intensify as companies rush to capitalize on consumers' "data exhaust," says Geoff White, counsel for the Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC). "There is no defence for this level of surveillance," he says, pointing out companies are profiting off the information while consumers either don't know it is happening or have little control over it. "You wouldn't sanction the ability to walk up and put a GPS tracking device in your purse or back pocket."

But on the surface, this data collection seems relatively benign. For example, Viasense analyzes bulk cellphone data, as well as data from sensors that detect Wi-Fi- or Bluetooth-enabled smartphones and other devices, to collect location information. The insights they generate, Basir and his business partner Kerry Morrison say, are meant to be "micro-generalizations" about groups to help clients, and are not linked to an individual. Plus, they encrypt and protect the data they gather, and are working with privacy groups to put in the right checks and balances. "It's entirely anonymous," Basir says. "We have absolutely no idea who that person is, or even what their phone number is."

Of course, lots of firms already know a lot about any given consumer. In exchange for, say, a bank account or a mortgage, people willingly and knowingly give up personal information from their income levels and credit histories to home addresses and other contact info. Companies have also long benefited from the advent of Internet cookies, the ability to log what a person surfing the web is clicking on, and for how long, over time. That information is used to decide what ads pop up on screen and how to target customers. But that ability to track online behavioural patterns, on a massive scale, is now possible in the real world.