I recently read an editorial in an electronics magazine about license plate readers, devices used by police and government to scan license plates on cars, look them up in a database, and report if the car is stolen or if the owner of the car is wanted by the law.

Information about the location of cars whose licenses are read is kept a long time, a potential privacy problem. Even plates of cars not involved in nefarious activities are scanned. Because license plates are displayed in public, it is perfectly legal to record them.

This is not the only way in which we are being recorded. In the old days, if the police wanted to find out what happened at a particular location, they had to find witnesses. Today, police can also consult footage from the large number of surveillance cameras in the area. In England, these are owned by the government, but in the United States, there seem to be just as many owned by businesses, not to mention the prevalence of cell phone cameras. In Russia, many cars use dashboard-mounted cameras, and so the recent meteorite event was captured. Even meteorite privacy is not safe.

Anyone having the slightest involvement in computer security knows that "security through obscurity" is one of the worst policies to follow. This policy tries to keep security holes secret, and hopes that no one finds out. This might have worked when access to computers was controlled by a small set of professionals, but today even the slightest flaw will be broadcast around the world as fast as a video of a cute kitten.

Those of us well out of college grew up in a time of what we can call "privacy through obscurity." Perhaps people could read your license plate, but unless your car was very suspicious and you were unlucky, it was unlikely that anyone would record it or even notice it. Unless you were famous, no one but friends would take your picture. Politicians and Hollywood stars learned to live with constant exposure and loss of privacy, but at least they were well compensated.

One unexpected side effect of work by engineers and computer scientists is that we are all Hollywood stars. But we don’t make the big bucks. Technology has made it possible for our public presence to be recorded and stored. Today, at least a person has to watch the videos to see if you are in them—work is being done on automating this also. Our privacy through obscurity is no more.

Gordon Bell has a project of recording his entire life. Today, we are all Gordon Bell. I’ve often wondered when he’d have time to look at this. However, I can imagine software that could look through streams of video and other information and go right to the moments you want to relive—or the moments some observer wants to look at more closely.

We tell our kids to be careful of their on-line presences, because someone might be watching. Perhaps they are well ahead of us. Someone will always be watching, in real life as well as on-line, and our kids are just getting ready for a world of little or no privacy.

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