

Dr. Nils Zurawski

paper delivered at ISA 2010 in Göteborg

13. July 2010

Local practice and global data

Loyalty cards as material cultural and cultural practice

You like shopping? Then I will take you shopping for a bit.

This talk was based on a research about loyalty cards, these little cards that you have that are given out by shops. It may raise a couple of problems and issues which I want to demonstrate here: One is the promises about data, data flows, data protection and difficulties about data protection in regard to loyalty cards. Another way of looking at how surveillance works - and we heard from the previous speaker about soft surveillance and Gary Marx saying - not in regard to police but to consumerism, consumer surveillance - speaking of soft surveillance and how the audience and the general public helps to generate all this data and helps to surveil people. And basically, I want to give you an example of how soft surveillance actually works and where it works.

What the practices are, and in which practices it is embedded in and why it works so well. And why it has nothing to do with surveillance in the minds of the people, when doing these practices. Finally, in the end, I want to show, there might be with this issue something that has to do with me in the world and how I situate myself in the bigger global world there is.

This is the subject of the session. There was global data or "global surveillance and local manifestations" and I made "global data flows". And they are produced locally. I produce my data locally, especially with loyalty cards: it is the corner shop I do it in or the bigger store, since corner shops do not tend to have loyalty cards. But bigger stores around the corner, they have it. So, I produce this data locally. Loyalty cards mean a look at the field of consumption, and consumption is many things. I just listed a few here: consumption is about mass production, it is a whole system of style, life, identity all

those issues. In Anthropology consumption is sometimes seen as much more one step below that - if you want. It is about the practices, about sacrifice, about the gift. Daniel Miller - an english social anthropologist - said that "shopping is love-making". Because you do not shop for yourself, but you often shop for someone else. You shop for your children and you bring them home something, you give something to them. Or you do it because you want to give them something. And then there is the whole thing about gift exchange and shopping or consumption not as money exchange - I buy stuff and give you money - but I give you some stuff and get something else, it builds up social relations.

I want to talk about shopping and the practices of shopping, because they are the local manifestations and the local practices in this global data flow, especially when it comes to loyalty cards.

In this research, we did interviews on shopping with people. We invited a couple of people, three to five on a session and we talked sixty to ninety minutes about shopping. We never told them at the beginning that we were going to talk about loyalty cards. That came in later during the talk, since we did not want to get them in one corner. "We want to talk about shopping." Instead we gave them coffee and some cake and talked about shopping. It came out that shopping is a very mundane an everyday practice that you all do. You all can relate to this, and this is something. There was one particular aspect, one image that popped up again and again: what I would call "the village". The corner store, the small place, the community. The research was done in Hamburg and Hamburg is not a „villagy“ place, it is an urban place. But people try and imagine some places where they are to be like in early times, the past: the village. These are some statements from people during the interviews. I translated them, they are originally in German.

But the Turk from the corner still greets me when I am passing. It is a very pleasant thing. People do it. Shopping is very everyday-like and a very close thing. I find this personal, personal in a good sense. And behind the counter it's the same people for years. So I know them, right? That's again the village and

the familiarity. *And whenever we buy there, it is fish or egg salad and something else. And when we recently only bought two items he said: 'And what about the egg salad?' And we looked at each other and said he's right. But no, today we don't want egg salad.* So, there is a profiling going on here, because you do it every day and every day. But there is no loyalty card involved here yet.

About things that happen when you talk over the counter, you know people. And she may say "Oh, my husband is sick." or "What happened to you?" and then you start talking. And that is what people miss today. In a supermarket you shop much more anonymously. So people want this "village", they want this everyday practice. And therefore they exchange very intimate information with it and do not find anything wrong about it.

And then just to show you the social relations and the embeddedness of the everyday practice: it is about relations, about accompanying girlfriends. People often shop together with other people. They do not shop alone. Shopping together is an important issue. This woman goes shopping with girlfriends, she consults and helps them to find the right dresses. With some irony she says *I love to spend the money of other people!* Because she says

Buy this! Or buy that! A couple said: *If we go to the grocery shop we mostly do it together with our mother. Because then we have her car.* These were two sisters who did not own a car. *But if it is only for small stuff, we walk or take the bus.*

So the family relation is used for certain purposes. But again, then they go with three people. Another couple:

To the weekly market we go together because it is such a nice thing to do. Once you stop working - because she is a pensioner - you have more time and arrange it differently too. And I love to go shopping on the market every week. There is a regularity among these practices very locally.

So shopping basically is a social practice that is embedded in everyday life. Something you do and something you do not think about so much.

Everyday life is in shopping. When we were talking about shopping we realised that people were bringing in everyday life issues into the talk about shopping. We asked them about shopping and suddenly they were telling us about their social relations, about how they felt, about other things that were touching on shopping but really not being concerned with the actual buying. Instead they were reflecting on different things. They said: *I buy wine*. And then they were reflecting on the quality of wine and friends they had for dinner. So everyday life is put into the talk about shopping, and shopping is part of everyday life. The same is loyalty cards. Loyalty cards are part of shopping practice. That is because this is what happens: You go to the cashier and this happens with the loyalty cards. And there is a practice of loyalty cards. So what you actually do with them. What it actually is that loyalty cards mean and what they are used for.

Asking people why they have a loyalty card and how they use it, we came across streams of argumentation. One such stream is about bonus points, because people wanted the points you get for whatever you buy. Some said:

It is a deal or a profit. Some even thought they made money with it. I heard some people say: If I do three percent ten times, then I have thirty percent.

It was a hard thing to get them off that calculation. But they think they make money with loyalty cards. They do not save money, they make it. It is about shopping habits, because people tend to have loyalty cards from shops they go to anyway. They would not go to a shop because of that funky loyalty card. But because they go there anyway, they take it. It is about family and that resembles the theme of shopping practice. The loyalty cards have much to do with shopping practices, they mirror them or are extending them and strengthening the practices of shopping anyway. In particular I found the obligation part of it interesting, because it was mostly used by people that said: *I don't have loyalty cards. I do not want to be obliged to go there. I don't want to go there just because I have a card.* So it was an argument brought forward because they did not want to have

a card and obligations. Well, you can have as many cards as you want, you do not have to go to the shop. But that is how they felt. *If I have a card, I have an obligation to go.* Some thought it is fun, because they liked to collect things. Then there was plain refusal with no further explanation. And data protection was a small issue. Mostly negatively: I am afraid of more advertisement and stuff. Materiality I leave out here. It has to do with the actual plastic of the card. Some statements to underline what I just said: *It is on my way.* Budni is a store, a drug store chain actually. *They have everything what I need and it is on my way. It is always good if you have kids and need to fill up gas often.* So this guy went to the same gas station because he gets points and funny toys for his son.

Loyalty cards and practices of shopping can also be learned. *By all means, my parents have many loyalty cards!* These were five young women - high school girls - and they said that they often used their parents cards. And they learned mostly from their mothers, because fathers tend not to go shopping it seems. I would buy the things anyway, so I want to have a loyalty card. And one was even looking forward to the letter holding the voucher with the 5€ or whatever you get from them. This is interesting because it is the same guy that was concerned about data issues - I called it data practices here - asking if he had a loyalty card: *Oh Budni, for years.* Budni is one of the most successful loyalty cards in Hamburg. It is a very Hamburgian thing. So for years he had that. Then we asked him if the data trade bothered him in any way, because it does go in various ways he can not control. And he said:

Well, not really, not at all. You need to read the fine print, I do not read it. But I know that they store the data and I know that they pass it on and trade them for advertisement purposes. I know all that. So, he knows that, that is why he does not read the fine print. And it does not bother him. Then he tells a story which must be lying back a couple of years. It does not have to do with a loyalty card, but with a catalogue obviously of a relative who stole data and ordered stuff for various thousand Marks at the time. This came out during a court case. *It is unbelievable what they do with your data today, but I am not afraid, even if I am telling these stories. But it is dangerous what they do with the data. Devastating!*

He has a clear opinion on what the state of trade all is but is not afraid. There were many of these contradictions. That people knew, but in the actual act of shopping they did not think of it. Only after we asked them about loyalty cards and data protection they came up with different stories. Other stories contradicting the rather free and liberal uses of loyalty cards. Very interesting! There seem to be different streams of argumentation working only at different times and in different contexts.

And then we asked the people - that was interesting too - and referred back to this locality, this "village" where I tell everything: Is it the same? If your baker knows that you buy for example three baguettes everyday. And suddenly you come up with only one for a week and she asks: *What happened to your husband? Are you seperated?* Or if the internet and other data collectors are better or worse, because they are anonymous. So, the difference between what the corner store knows about you and what big companies know because they collect the data. A person said: *Yes there is a difference between the two.*

When I go to the grocer at Schanze - the quarter I live in - it is people I deal with. They work there. And there is personal information exchanged which cannot really be traded commercially. So just between you and me: the baker, the grocer, the butcher does not go about and tell everybody what you just bought. Or that your husband does not look well today or that your girlfriend left. It was a conscious decision, it is great when I go there for a particular shop and a particular way of buying. I think this is great! I go there every two or three days, even just to buy something small.

With all these data issues this is really it. For me it is something not clear and not easy to manage. It does not really translate well, but this person expressed that there is a big world out there that she cannot understand because of all the data. It is all unclear and she does not know what happens there. So this is fear - I do not know if this is the right word - but at least awkwardness, scepticism.

I come to one conclusion: Talk about data protection and loyalty cards is difficult. From my point of view - based on the research - data protection people, consumer advocates and the consumers themselves do not come together. Because the data protection people say: *Don't leave your data*. The consumer says: *Well, I got something for it. I buy, I shop, it is something I so anyway*. They simply do not talk on the same level. I would not generally call the arguments of the data protectors boring. But in this case they are. Because they always say: *It is your data, it is your data*. And the shopper goes: *But that is my stuff*. They are not talking on the same level. Raising data protection issues with consumers is a difficult thing, because it goes in different levels.

The second conclusion: How to look at surveillance? I did not want to look at surveillance from above. But I wanted to look at where it happens, because surveillance does happen in some part. And this is the soft surveillance practices. It is what people do. I chose where surveillance aspects can attach or where monitoring or profiling of people happens, for the time being let us call that surveillance. Where can it attach to surveillance practices and why is it so easy for them to attach? Just because it is two levels and they do not recognize it. I wanted to look at how people actually act and how the fields look like where this action is when we talk about consumer surveillance. Because consuming and surveillance are two separate issues. They do have an interface, but it is not always the same nor is it felt the same. This is what I would argue for. Looking at practices of surveillance, not only consumer surveillance but other practices as well: Where does surveillance actually happen? What happens when you surveil? What is the context? Who are the people?

The last thing is the individual in the world outside there. The individual has this global data and does not see it. So, there must be a way that the individual relates to this unknown world and to situate itself within it. Which means that local practices are also a good way to look at how people situate themselves within this unknown global frame of which only some bits and pieces are known. And if we talk about surveillance and you do not know who is looking or you do not know where your data is going, you may work with the term conspiracy. There might be a conspiracy out there. Or you can work with

cognitive mapping aspects. How the world looks like? And how does the local relate to the global? But this is something I am beginning to think further from this little piece of research on loyalty cards.

Thank you very much!