

IS "BIG BROTHER" WATCHING?

On May 8th, as part of its Friday Evening Forum series, the School was host to award-winning investigative reporter Dennis King, who conducted a seminar entitled *Is Big Brother Watching?* King, most recently the author of *Get the Facts on Anyone*, began by outlining the ways in which most people leave a "paper trail", a semi-public record consisting of personal and background material about their private lives. This information, gathered on people from court records, credit agencies, federal tax lien indexes, even the Department of Motor Vehicles, is collated and fed into what King called an "elaborately organized data network." This network, made up of various organizations, the Federal Government, large corporations and private investigating companies, works through "information broker firms" which sell and trade information to anyone, including private citizens.

The amount of information and its easy accesability is staggering. For instance, King says, the credit company TRW has data "on just about everyone in the US." Whenever a county court house updates its computer file system "there are people with portable computers lapping it all up." So intensive and up-to-date is the information gathered by corporations and private investigators, that Federal agencies like the FBI and CIA often plug into these sources for the latest info on people and organizations.

King's take on all this is rather benign. Taking what might be described as a laissez-faire approach to the constant circulation and exchange of personal histories, King sees a sort of equilibrium of surveillance-- if some one can get the facts on you, you can turn around and get the facts on them, providing of course you have the time and money to do so. If your landlord or local politician is engaging in some unseemly activity directed against you or your community, you can, according to King, turn the tables on them, access the darker side of their private life and threaten to make it more widely known. You can now, following King's reasoning, fight any potential information advesary to a draw -- a kind of mutual deterence based on blackmail. King sees this state of affairs as "democratic."

In line with this commodification and marketing of information both public and private, King's book, *Get the Facts on Anyone*, is a how-to manual that promises to teach you how to gain access to just about anything about anybody-- "even the phone number of your favorite celebrity", according to the backcover. While stating in the introduction and in a few chapters that these techniques can be put to good and effective use by individuals and public interest groups fighting the abuse of public trust, much of what is actually being offered is how to pry into peoples' medical and welfare records; chapter 11 even has a sub-heading entitled "Subject's Garbage".

While none of these techniques may be objectionable in a particular moral or legal sense, one may wonder if the encouragement of widespread information-hacking doesn't lead to a general surveillance-ambience, a culture of mutual distrust. --David Domke