In MIT dining halls, Big Brother is watching

Tracking tensions at Tech.

By: Mike Ragalie

Issue date: 11/17/05 Section: Forum

The inaugural month of my stay at Harvard was marked by a definite aversion toward visiting Annenberg alone. If, in spite of my initial cowardice, I elected to make the trek solo, I would open the door to a sea of faces, lost, confused, and with no clue as to where my friends were sitting. After collecting food and haphazardly stumbling around the cafeteria for a few moments, I may or may not have found someone to sit with, but I certainly always succeeded in looking ridiculous.

Future freshmen may not experience this humbling exercise, however. With technology recently installed at MIT, students know exactly where their peers are chilling. No, MIT hasn't put something in the water or surgically implanted microchips into students when they weren't looking. Its system is much more rudimentary than that. It's taken to monitoring student wireless access, and by using a special program network computers can plot each user's location at any given time. They can even make pretty maps.

I will not deny that a system like the one installed at MIT could be beneficial here at Harvard. We'd have to carry our laptops around or invest in PDAs, but if it meant I would never again arrive early and alone at a meeting or social function, I would personally insure that my friends and colleagues toted their wireless devices everywhere. Then I could simply wait for each of them to arrive at the established location before making a marvelously timed entrance. "¿Quién es el hombre?" I would say. "Yo soy el hombre."

Of course, there would also be times when I wouldn't want others to know where I was. MIT's system provides for such an eventuality by allowing students to opt out of displaying their personal information to the general public. But even if my friends can't see me hunkered down in my room on a Saturday night, whoever has access to the data used to produce the maps certainly can. For even if identifying information is redacted from public view, it still must exist in some form if the collation program is to distinguish between those who do and do not want their locations revealed.

Whenever an institution attempts to monitor the comings and goings of its members, an element of the populace starts squawking, usually with great fervor. They speak of privacy and of the right to remain anonymous and of the Orwellian nature of this or that scheme. But it seems there is some strength to the opposing argument as well. If you do nothing wrong, then what do you have to fear?

Sure, even if we may not be engaging in anything illegal, each of us does things outside the norm of college-student behavior. But wouldn't a comprehensive tracking system help us to grow stronger and more independent, force us to acknowledge our eccentricities and embrace our differences? Harvard sells itself as a place devoted to diversity and tolerance, where ideas and opinions of many different forms can compete for attention and acceptance. Why are we so afraid?

Because beneath the veneer of loving community, of empathy and compassion and respect, lie men and women with daggers. Despite exhortations that urge students to view success in terms of individual achievement - competition against ourselves - our very presence here speaks volumes of our ability to do better than others. Undoubtedly, at least some of us do better than others, because we have made it our goal to do better than others. The ideal of tolerance cannot stand in an environment in which individuals market their particular character traits and behavior patterns as perfection.
We see this unfortunate truth everyday. Among some crowds, sobriety is a damnable offense, and anyone who fails to stumble his or her way to at least three different venues of intoxication is cast out like a leper. Another group declares drunkenness to be the exclusive preserve of the wealthy, athletic, and stupid and proposes that sober intellectualism is superior in all respects to partying. Even without constant knowledge of the activities of others, it's easy enough to pressure people to think and act in a certain way. But remove the last vestige of privacy and very few will choose to act as individuals, knowing it will harm their station among groups of friends.

It is ironic that more openness, in this case, encourages oppression. Yes, you could turn off the public monitoring, but that too invites suspicion. The goal of MIT's new system may have been to improve communication and accessibility between students, but the effect will almost certainly be to create a chilling effect on new and exciting ideas. Existing groups will carefully scrutinize every single deviation from the norm, deciding which activities are to be immediately condoned and which are to be unilaterally forbidden. Yes, MIT, you've taken us another step towards an Orwellian nightmare. So please, just give your students a little space.

The inaugural month of my stay at Harvard was marked by a definite aversion toward visiting Annenberg alone. If, in spite of my initial cowardice, I elected to make the trek solo, I would open the door to a sea of faces, lost, confused, and with no clue as to where my friends were sitting. After collecting food and haphazardly stumbling around the cafeteria for a few moments, I may or may not have found someone to sit with, but I certainly always succeeded in looking ridiculous.

Future freshmen may not experience this humbling exercise, however. With technology recently installed at MIT, students know exactly where their peers are chilling. No, MIT hasn't put something in the water or surgically implanted microchips into students when they weren't looking. Its system is much more rudimentary than that. It's taken to monitoring student wireless access, and by using a special program network computers can plot each user's location at any given time. They can even make pretty maps.

I will not deny that a system like the one installed at MIT could be beneficial here at Harvard. We'd have to carry our laptops around or invest in PDAs, but if it meant I would never again arrive early and alone at a meeting or social function, I would personally insure that my friends and colleagues tooted their wireless devices everywhere. Then I could simply wait for each of them to arrive at the established location before making a marvelously timed entrance. "¿Quién es el hombre?" I would say. "Yo soy el hombre."

Of course, there would also be times when I wouldn't want others to know where I was. MIT's system provides for such an eventuality by allowing students to opt out of displaying their personal information to the general public. But even if my friends can't see me hunkered down in my room on a Saturday night, whoever has access to the data used to produce the maps certainly can. For even if identifying information is redacted from public view, it still must exist in some form if the collation program is to distinguish between those who do and do not want their locations revealed.

Whenever an institution attempts to monitor the comings and goings of its members, an element of the populace starts squawking, usually with great fervor. They speak of privacy and of the right to remain anonymous and of the Orwellian nature of this or that scheme. But it seems there is some strength to the opposing argument as well. If you do nothing wrong, then what do you have to fear?

Sure, even if we may not be engaging in anything illegal, each of us does things outside the norm of college-student behavior. But wouldn't a comprehensive tracking system help us to grow stronger and more independent, force us to acknowledge our eccentricities and embrace our differences? Harvard sells itself as a place devoted to diversity and tolerance, where ideas and opinions of many different forms can compete for attention and acceptance. Why are we so afraid?

Because beneath the veneer of loving community, of empathy and compassion and respect, lie men and women with daggers. Despite exhortations that urge students to view success in terms of individual achievement - competition against ourselves - our very presence here speaks volumes of our ability to do better than others. Undoubtedly, at least some of us do better than others, because we have made it our goal to do better than others. The ideal of tolerance cannot stand in an environment in which individuals market their particular character traits and behavior patterns as perfection.
We see this unfortunate truth everyday. Among some crowds, sobriety is a damnable offense, and anyone who fails to stumble his or her way to at least three different venues of intoxication is cast out like a leper. Another group declares drunkenness to be the exclusive preserve of the wealthy, athletic, and stupid and proposes that sober intellectualism is superior in all respects to partying. Even without constant knowledge of the activities of others, it's easy enough to pressure people to think and act in a certain way. But remove the last vestige of privacy and very few will choose to act as individuals, knowing it will harm their station among groups of friends.

It is ironic that more openness, in this case, encourages oppression. Yes, you could turn off the public monitoring, but that too invites suspicion. The goal of MIT's new system may have been to improve communication and accessibility between students, but the effect will almost certainly be to create a chilling effect on new and exciting ideas. Existing groups will carefully scrutinize every single deviation from the norm, deciding which activities are to be immediately condoned and which are to be unilaterally forbidden. Yes, MIT, you've taken us another step towards an Orwellian nightmare. So please, just give your students a little space.