

The Matrix Response Paper

Humans today inhabit two worlds. Along with physical reality, we exist as digital personas in a complementary cyber-society. In one sense, our digital selves reflect our true selves: medical records, bank statements, and social lives straddle the digital-physical divider. Yet, the divider can also provide the veil of anonymity, enabling the creation of entirely new identities. Anonymity grants free-reign to the imagination, allowing us to explore experiences beyond the circumstances of our physical-reality personas (the peasant can live as a king and vice versa). But, in many cases, anonymity also removes the notion of real consequences, allowing us to explore our darkest curiosities, from joining racist communities to indulging sexually violent fantasies. Surveillance naturally arises, creeping along the edges of the seeming lawlessness of cyberspace. What better way to prevent atrocities than detect their digital precursors? But a host of ethical concerns appear alongside the justifiable desire to prevent the physical manifestation of digital thought-crimes. A rapist certainly faces punishment, but can we prosecute someone who commits rape in a videogame? For that matter, can we punish someone for thoughts relating to rape?

Popular media commonly explores themes of surveillance, particularly its role in a world that increasingly blurs the line between the physical and the virtual. The film, *The Matrix*, provides a compelling example, foreshadowing real-world events such as the U.S.A. Patriot Act (which expanded government surveillance of domestic internet/telecommunications to combat terrorism). The Matrix referred to in the film is a virtual reality system operated by sentient artificial intelligence (AI) that has conquered the human race. By interfacing with the human nervous system, the system generates artificial inputs to create a false world in which to contain and monitor the minds of humans, which are bred in captivity and used as energy sources to power the activities of the AI.

Surveillance in *The Matrix* extends beyond the current division between the physical and digital. Before cyberspace, two forms of expression existed: the private thought and the public action. The thought exists in a separated, mental world, open only to the individual. The action, however, provides the thought with form in the physical world, which can be interpreted and observed by others. Due to the rise of the digital age, we now have an intermediate between private thought and public action: “digital projection,” (the “videogame rapist” between rape fantasizer and rapist). The surveillance presence, which previously monitored only the public action, now encroaches on the digital projection. But in the futuristic world of *The Matrix*, the system monitors thoughts themselves and asks the question, can perfect order justify the destruction of “private” thoughts? The film characterizes the individual as fundamentally derived from social inputs, and thus, the system controls all human behavior by providing artificial inputs. Not only does the Matrix monitor thoughts, it actively controls them by crafting a reality that restricts the range of human ideas. By “manufacturing” the individual, the Matrix constructs an ordered collective human experience brick-by-brick, where each individual acts as an additional agent of conformity, enforcing the ideals imposed on them by the system.

Returning to the question of freedom of thought, the plot of *The Matrix* provides a cautionary tale. The film posits that full control over human thought cannot be achieved, since innate human curiosity inevitably forces us to question the laws that dictate our universe. The

Resistance fighters in the film escape the confines of the Matrix by discovering its digital nature (though how this discovery occurs is not explored in the film). Additionally, the film suggests that the “perfect order” promised by thought surveillance cannot be achieved since control of the system must belong to some entity, and hence the definition of “perfect” relies on interpretation by the entity. In the case of *The Matrix*, the “perfect” outcome requires the containment of humanity and proliferation of AI, contrary to the desires of the subjects of the surveillance. Thought surveillance confers absolute power over human action, yet no absolute metric exists for the optimal function of human society. Ultimately, *The Matrix* comments on the dangers of a future we are fast approaching, in which “the machine” invades every aspect of our activities. Perhaps not at the level of thoughts, but at the level of our sleep schedules through wearable technologies, our shopping habits through our internet profiles, and our deepest desires through our “incognito” browsing history.

A particularly compelling scene from the film that relates the fragile notion of reality occurs when the traitor, Cypher, confers with Agent Smith, an extension of the ruling AI which polices the Matrix/monitors human behavior in the system. Cypher sells his fellow Resistance members to Agent Smith for a chance to forget everything about the Matrix and return as an ignorant inhabitant. Rather than live in a miserable, foreign reality, he chooses to return to the familiar confines of a mental prison. At a restaurant with the Agent, he describes his motivations: “you know, I know this steak doesn't exist. I know that when I put it in my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious. After nine years, you know what I realize? Ignorance is bliss.” (*The Matrix*) This viewpoint expresses the counterpoint to the films overarching themes of freedom and refutation of modern surveillance principles. Cypher actively chooses to remain a cog in the system because he desires comfort. He fears change. The modern march of technology creeps into each facet of our waking (and slumbering) world, and we desire to remain connected, despite the knowledge that our data (perhaps our lives themselves) are on display through this digital medium to corporations and government agencies. Cypher just wishes to return to the world he knows, to remain connected and forget the truth, just as we consciously ignore the implications of our digital lives, clicking through privacy agreements without worrying what we may be giving away to be a part of the system.

Today, a haze envelops the line between privacy and security. The digital persona, a chance for creative freedom on the vast expanse of cyberspace, also provides a gateway into our thoughts, and by extension, the possibilities of our actions. Can the security of society justify the surveillance of our private thoughts (or the digital projections of those thoughts)? Films like *The Matrix* caution against such intrusions, while policies including the U.S.A. Patriot Act advocate for them. A century and a half before *The Matrix*'s proposed future, the distinction between the digital and physical realms already fades, and with it, the distance between private thought and public action diminishes. Ultimately, we have a responsibility as a society to draw the line, or we will soon find ourselves confined by the Matrix; our thoughts monitored and controlled by the digital world in which, each day, we become increasingly, inextricably consumed.