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“Care for a little more data?”

Loyalty cards: Material good or tool for bargains?

The active consumer, the prosumer or produser (Bruns), does not only become actively involved in the act of consumption, but also in his or her own surveillance, eg. when generating its own consumer profiles. And he/her likes doing it. Every German holds an average of 2 to 4 loyalty cards in the wallet. Despite the existing knowledge about data protection, surveillance and address trading regarding so called consumer control technologies, this does not play a prominent role when it comes to the every day uses of such cards. Why is that so? And which role do the little plastic cards play at all?

Concerning the voluntary compliance in providing such data to the corporations Gary T. Marx refers to it as soft surveillance (2006). It is not about big brother, but rather the customers themselves that give away personal data that finds its way in the different database systems. Is it apt to speak of ignorance or stupidity among the consumers? Or are such technologies deeply embedded within narratives and cultural practices that does not connect the mass disposal of data with surveillance or control?

To study loyalty cards from a perspective of cultural anthropology we have to turn to the field in which they are most prominent: Consumption and the cultures of consumption. Both are the most prominent fields of surveillance in the 21st century (cf. Marx 2006; Samatas 2004). Consumption as part of everyday life has not only economical aspects, but is also part of cultural practice and an instrument to reinterpret cultural patterns and signs to generate new styles. The consumer is an active agent within this system of sign production - hence a prosumer or produser. Loyalty cards may be seen as the materialisation of such a consumer culture and are situated at the interface between cultural every day practices and control.

A study that inquires the meaning of consumption as social practice and the assessment and adaption of technology, wants to find answers as to the meaning of loyalty card at the interface of consumption and technology. First results suggest that those cards are more than a technology for discounts. Other meanings and significance is ascribed to them. As a good the cards are part of the material world of consumer goods themselves. Sometimes attribution go far beyond potential discounts. Sometimes it is “a question of honour” to have a particular loyalty card, as one informant pointed out. But what has honour to do with anything? I assume that here is more at stake than simple bargaining for discounts - at least from the side of the consumer. Embedded in 150 years of consumer culture, its narratives, and learned and traded practices, will eventually be transferred onto the cards. They are no longer a means to an end (ie. discounts) but a material good, giving its carrier a certain prestige, which signifies the culture of consumption itself.

In this talk I would like to discuss how loyalty cards are embedded in social practices of consumption, which role knowledge labour data protection does play concerning its uses and why the technology itself is part of the forms of soft surveillance, making the consumer part and agent of its own control.