Turow's 'Aisles Have Eyes': How sellers track us, and how to fight back

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Joseph Turow, author of "The Aisles Have Eyes."
How Retailers Track Your Shopping, Strip Your Privacy, and Define Your Power

By Joseph Turow

Yale University Press. 336 pp. $30.

In 2015, Nielsen reported that a grocery store in which customers would receive personal recommendations and offers the moment they entered was “closer than you think.” And, according to Joseph Turow, so is “the connected home,” where food containers will remind us of expiration dates, and cosmetics will advise us about the lipstick color relevant to the weather. These interactions — and information about customer emotions, supplied by facial-recognition software synched
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...to a smartphone app — will be monitored by retailers and manufacturers, who will send their own messages.

In *The Aisles Have Eyes*, Turow, a professor at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, provides a trenchant, timely, and troubling account of the data-mining, in-store tracking, and predictive analytics that brick-and-mortar retailers are using to gather information about shoppers and to design strategies to retain the loyalty of those with “high lifetime value.” Clearly, these activities have profound implications for privacy. But Turow demonstrates that this new and pervasive layer of surveillance and individualized profiling flies beneath the public radar — and is virtually unregulated.

These days, Turow demonstrates, marketers and retailers have closed ranks around the idea that their ability to identify customers facially and demographically and track likes and dislikes is perfectly all right because shoppers give their consent by downloading apps or turning on WiFi, Bluetooth, or other features of mobile devices. Corporate privacy policies are vague, turgid, and unreadable by nonexperts; their contracts are “festooned with take-it-or-leave-it terms.”

To make matters worse, public-opinion surveys indicate people don’t understand what is “happening behind the screen,” think the government protects them far more than it does, and admit feeling vulnerable, but “are resigned to the inevitability of surveillance and the power of marketers to harvest their data.” And, interestingly, the attitudes of young adults toward privacy is not all that different from those of older adults.

Americans, Turow concludes, do not approve of a world in which “the democratized marketplace,” where each individual pays the same price for a product or service, is disappearing, and they feel powerless to do anything about it.
Persuaded that consumers cannot rely on self-regulation by marketers and retailers, Turow thinks that citizens have the right to know the specific data on which firms base their targeted messages, coupons, and so on — and that public-interest organizations should name and shame firms that do not abide by transparency norms or maintain sound privacy policies.

These measures are only a start, Turow says, and the stakes are high. Without some dramatic change, the aisles — and lots of other places — will have eyes. And our children and grandchildren will grow up embracing the mantra “Shoppers want to be tracked.”

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