8
Someone to Watch Over
Me – Gender, Technologies,
Privacy and Surveillance

Introduction: the gender–privacy link

The empirical examples in this and Chapters 6 and 7 share a common leitmotiv: they are based on privacy and watching and what happens when privacy is breached, where all of these dimensions are to be understood in gender terms. The question of privacy has a strong gender dimension and it is not surprising to find that this is echoed in the digital world. Privacy is a concern not just in terms of ethics; there are also important legal and political dimensions embedded in the concept as the question of whether privacy is different for women and men, and also how this difference can be captured in legislation, continues to be of concern (MacKinnon 1987; DeCew 1997). When we consider privacy we set up a complex ethical equation where the variables of different types of privacy, gender, culture and technologies are all implicated.

Clearly, privacy, and, more specifically, how to understand when women’s privacy is being violated, and how to protect women’s privacy, is one of the key elements of feminist politics, legal theory and indeed, ethics. Hence it is important to have the necessary theoretical tools to expose and analyse violations of privacy, especially new types of violation which may be occurring in cyberspace. Echoing Kramer and Kramarae (1997), if women have little sense of individual autonomy, it is not always easy to see when their privacy is being violated. Similarly, feminist political theory, in considering the relation between private and public spheres, questions women’s and men’s unequal participation in democracy and hence their differential access to freedom and privacy (Pateman 1989). These considerations are especially pertinent to the
problems raised in this book. Under the larger umbrella of privacy, this chapter turns to an issue which continues to raise much concern, namely surveillance, and questions whether there is a gender dimension to the subject which is currently underexplored. First of all, drawing on the discussion in Chapters 3 and 4, in particular, I consider definitions of privacy, including physical, informational and decisional privacies before going on to discuss, in more detail, the historical, contingent nature of our concept of privacy and the relationship between technology and privacy. This is followed by a discussion of the treatment of surveillance through ICTs and the Panopticon and a consideration of the steps that some Western governments are taking in increasing data surveillance in the wake of increased concerns over terrorism.

Gender and the topic of privacy has long been of interest to feminist writers. The relationship between gender, ICTs and privacy is complex. The discussion in this chapter draws upon my prior analysis of Internet dating, cyberstalking and Internet pornography. I want to avoid the suggestion that women’s experience of privacy on the Internet is all negative. Apart from anything else the danger of such a view is that essentialist stereotypes of women’s relationship to technology may be unwittingly reinforced. Although there are clearly negative stories to be found, at the same time, women, in the same way that men do, find positive uses for ICTs for networking, work and leisure (Adam and Green 1998). This is as much a part of the story of gender, ICTs and ethics as the more negative aspects. Indeed it is often the inventive, unexpected uses of technologies which demonstrate that we are not driven by technology but have choices in its use.

What is privacy?

Although much of the discussion of previous chapters revolved around privacy in some form or other, I now wish to tackle the subject more directly and to make a start by considering legal and philosophical definitions of privacy. Allen (1998, p. 457) notes the importance of privacy in Western democracies, more or less on a par with liberty and equality as a central liberal value. Although privacy is a central notion in our lives, DeCew (1997) argues that it has only fairly recently been subject to detailed philosophical analysis. As a concept, it is complex, subject to much disagreement amongst commentators, and is historically and culturally contingent. As DeCew (ibid., p. 9) notes, legal protection for privacy in the USA has only developed in the last hundred or so years, despite political writing on the distinction between public and private