



## We're Being Watched

Sweaty little men are hiding video cameras in bathrooms, showers, ceilings, and walls to get their kicks. And there's virtually nothing women can do about it-except smile and say, "Sleaze."

BY MARK LASSWELL

Jessica Paterson, 22, cherished her job as a reporter at the *Apalachicola Times* in Florida. It was a chance at a career that she thought had vanished five years ago when pregnancy forced her to forgo a journalism scholarship to Troy State University in Alabama. But in May last year, she landed a job as an assistant at the weekly paper in the Gulf Coast town of 2,600 where she grew up. Friends and family members blanched upon hearing her news-the paper's manager, John Lee, had a cocky, abrasive manner that had chafed many folks in Apalachicola, but Paterson saw the position as her best and perhaps only shot at becoming a newspaper reporter. By then she had a toddler at home, her husband worked at a seafood-processing plant, and they had a mortgage to worry about. Chasing a journalism career somewhere else was an unlikely option.

Paterson's gamble paid off within a matter of weeks: Lee asked her to fill in for a reporter who quit, and then, when another writer left, Paterson became a full-time journalist. Her hunch about the job had been correct, but so had the warnings about Lee. Beyond being the sort of boss who could turn lunchtime into a question of employee dedication ("I'm not wasting time eating lunch. Too much work," he'd say pointedly to the staff), the middle-aged Lee sometimes seemed just plain odd: One day, Cynthia Nations, who sold advertising for the paper and like Paterson, is in her early 20s, noticed that when she went to the employee rest room adjoining his office, Lee would go into his office and close the door, emerging soon after she returned to her desk. "Watch this," Nations whispered to Paterson. "Watch what he does." Nations walked to the rest room; Lee headed for his office. It soon became apparent that when female employees used the rest room, Lee often retired to his office. And locked the door.

What Nations, Paterson, and the other workers at the *Apalachicola Times* did not know then was that in the employee rest room, concealed behind an air-conditioning vent in the ceiling above the toilet, perched a palm-size video camera with, as a police officer would later report, a live feed to a video monitor in John Lee's office.

"We just feel violated and degraded," Paterson said after the discovery. "Thinking that someone is watching us, that's a sickening feeling." Paterson quit the job she had dreamed of-her next assignment would have been covering a police drug bust-the day after the Times's toilet-cam was discovered on March 2 by police acting on an anonymous tip. Almost as astonishing to Paterson as the hidden camera was assistant state attorney, Ron Flury's announcement on April 30: John Lee hadn't done anything illegal.

Family movies. Security at 7-Elevens. Tedious conceptual art. Those were the staple uses for video cameras back when they looked like toasters with zoom lenses. In the late '90s, though, miniaturization technology and shrinking prices allow almost anybody to record anything, anywhere. And people do-their number inevitably including countless sickos who believe, correctly, that no matter how skin-crawlingly intrusive their video forays may be, there's not much the law can do to them. At least that was almost uniformly the case until this year, the year of Brian De Palma's securitycam thriller *Snake Eyes* and Peter Weir's life-as-video *The Truman Show*. Just when Hollywood is capturing the sense that America at the end of the century is a place where even the amber waves of grain are probably being monitored on closed circuit television down at the farm coop, the first hint of a looming problem has flicked into view-thanks to that teeny camera down in Apalachicola.

Our omnivideo culture has its advantages, of course. It was reassuring in June to see Citibank unveil a NASA-like security command center in New York, where 132 ATM locations are monitored on video 24 hours a day (uniformed, armed security guards are dispatched in cars to chat with persistent loiterers). And who besides shoplifters-can blame retail stores for keeping a video eye peeled? In 1995 merchants lost an estimated \$20.1 billion to light-fingered customers and employees, according to the Security Research Project at the University of Florida. Store surveillance can be discreet, like the tasteful little camera freshly tucked into a corner of the new Donna Karan boutique at Bergdorf Goodman in New York, or not so discreet: A few blocks away, Bloomingdale's looks like an ultrasecure casino, with cameras peering down from gleaming black bubbles that blister the ceilings.

The new video ubiquity has also been a godsend to parents, whether they're installing a \$200 nanny-cam in a hollowed-out Paddington bear at home or sending their child to a daycare center that pipes video images to the Internet, so working moms and dads can watch their kid scrapping with playmates as if it's a pay-perview bout. For better or worse, a client of the Counter Spy Shop in New York City even created his own cuckoldcam system not long ago. He travels frequently and isn't entirely confident about his wife's habits while he's away. Solution: the digital Spy Cam11, with a 5/16-inch lens and built-in telephone modem. The businessman had the camera secretly installed in his bedroom and now can sit in a Singapore hotel room watching live video from home on his laptop computer.

People are even dining more happily, thanks to the video camera. At Restaurant Daniel, the tony Upper East Side place run by chef Daniel Boulud, four discreet cameras in the ceiling feed a monitor in the kitchen so that Boulud can guide the arrival and departure of dishes with the precision of an air-traffic controller. Boulud is aware of the potential creepiness factor in eating under surveillance-all we'd need is a disembodied voice from above asking "Where's your napkin?" to complete the Orwellian Big Mother quality of the experience. He emphasizes that "it's not recorded on tape. It's for communication and efficiency of service." And if a patron inquires about the overhead cameras, "we tell them that it's the security system when we close at night." Boulud says that when the restaurant moves in December to larger premises at the former Mayfair hotel, he'll install "about 15" cameras.

If someone seems to know a little too much about our movements, the natural reaction these days is to assume we're being watched. A woman who used to stay at the 14-room, antique-studded Sherman House hotel in San Francisco swore off the place not long ago, positive there are cameras in the guest rooms after her husband called the hotel and was told, "She's in the shower." Manager Christine Berlin says the hotel doesn't use video surveillance even in the public areas-and certainly not in the bathrooms. "It amazes people, when they call, what we know" about guests, Berlin says, pointing out that the front-desk staff can take room-service orders, field calls as a concierge service, and watch traffic in and out the front door. "It could be something as simple as she called for a

room service order and said, 'I'm getting into the shower-have them just leave it outside the door.'" The guest, however, had done nothing of the sort.

There are suspicions of videocreepiness, of course, and then there's the real, slimy thing. The arrival of go-everywhere video is like the advent of go-everywhere telephones: countless benefits to society, and an absolute boon to the irredeemably sleazy- whether it's the guy on Huntington Beach in California who concealed a camera in a boom box so he could get close-ups of women's bathing-suited bums, or the Internet proprietors of showercam.com. Their Web site for voyeurs brags: "We also have two webcams mounted in a tanning booth! The first camera is mounted so you can see women undress before entering the tanning chamber. The second camera is mounted inside the tanning chamber for a close up '[genital] view.'" A video-Voyeur subgenre on the Internet is called "upskirt," with dozens of sites devoted to the subject. Upskirters prowl malls, parks, and stores, perhaps with a video camera in a low-slung gym bag or in hand, slipping up behind women and getting a dog's-eye view of whatever's under their skirts.

All this amounts to the ad hoc surveilling of America, a clandestine yet saturating video-watchfulness. We unwittingly perform all day long for cameras, hardly getting a sense of the extent of the blanket coverage of our lives until it becomes the grist of popular culture. On television, America's Funniest Home Videos just seems quaint; now the video action is on Fox, which is almost impossible to watch without seeing helicopter-cam coverage of some hapless loser dodging cops and clambering over backyard fences. Leeza Gibbons's daytime talk show recently featured a woman who discovered that her landlord was using hidden cameras to tape throughout her apartment. She also found out that his hobby wasn't a crime and that her lease was initially unbreakable; she resorted to using the bathroom while covered with a bedsheet. Her solution might have been comic-she looked like Caspar, the Micturating Ghost-if it hadn't been so at-wit's-end desperate.

A quarter of a century ago, director Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* reflected the nation's Watergate-era uneasiness about intercepting voices with wiretaps and bugs. Strict federal laws had recently been enacted to protect the privacy of conversations. Yet when it comes to secret videotaping, civil libertarians and privacy advocates have tended to despair over the public's docility and most legislators' indifference.