

Market Knowledge and the Good Citizen¹

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“Don’t you want to be a number?”

A few years ago, I saw this question on a billboard near the Rue de la loi in Brussels. It served as the caption to a picture of a young woman with a bar code stamped on her forehead. Her expression was one of studied indifference to the inscription on her face and to the gaze of the camera: her image signified unconstrained cool, a connotation of extroversion, mobility, and individuality. Yet her indifference was framed as a peevishly infantile and brazen reaction to a legitimate business request. For as she shrugged off the weight of being a numbered subject, she appeared to endorse the injunction to accept surveillance as a minor nuisance in marketplace relations. “Of course,” she seemed to say, “I don’t want to be a number; nobody *wants* to be a number. It’s just the way things are.”

This is an image of the good citizen of the marketplace as defined in the political economy of the information society. In one breath, merchants and lawmakers have acknowledged that no one worth their individuality actually wants to be numbered and tracked. In the next, this charitable rhetoric becomes condescending, telling consumers that in the real world everybody has become a number anyway. Consider the views of Bernard Siouffi, Director of the Union Française de Marketing Direct and leading figure in the French and European trade organizations of direct marketing, mail order, and distance selling. “I’m a marketing man, okay, so I like

to be transparent to consumers,” Siouffi explained. “I like consumers to express free will, and if they don’t want to be on a marketing list I ask them to write a letter telling me they want out.” In the end, said Siouffi, “it’s a choice people make. They don’t want TV, they don’t want Internet, they want to be on an island. So I put them on an island” (Interview February 27, 1996). For Siouffi, we are objects of surveillance by virtue of our location within the information society; that’s life in the marketer’s world. We are also free to seek shelter from surveillance, an option that is meant to be comforting, though it resonates, in Siouffi’s words, with a sense of exile and isolation. Nobody wants to be a number, but remember that it’s lonely outside the informational marketplace.

This article offers a small critique of the political economy and ideology that have elevated the commercial right to use and trade personal data over the individual right to remain un-numbered, the right, that is, to data privacy. The context is my research on the European Parliament and Council’s 1995 Directive “on the protection of individuals with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data” (hereafter, Directive). Here I want to focus on how the property standard installed within this and related policy discourses diminishes data privacy to semi-sovereign status and accords master sovereignty to commercial surveillance. I hope to clarify what it means