

## MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

### EPISODE #213

# Eyes Everywhere: The Hidden World of Modern Surveillance

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## EPISODE SYNOPSIS

In this episode, Herman and Corn dive into the rapidly evolving landscape of public and private surveillance, sparked by a housemate's discovery of surprisingly powerful consumer baby monitors. They explore the massive technological gap between high-end home gear and professional-grade systems that can read license plates from blocks away, while uncovering the "iceberg" of hidden sensors like thermal imaging and Wi-Fi sensing. Finally, the duo compares the global surveillance landscape, from China's highly integrated social systems and Jerusalem's dense security networks to the European Union's strict privacy protections, questioning what it means to live in a world where the walls are increasingly watching back.

## DANIEL'S PROMPT

### Daniel

I'd like to talk about surveillance cameras. My introduction to IP cameras was through becoming a father and setting up cameras in the house to keep an eye on my child. I was amazed by the infrared capabilities and HD resolution of a relatively inexpensive camera, which made me wonder about the powerful surveillance technology all around us. I have a few specific questions: Is it fair to assume that professional security cameras are far more powerful than people realize? What do you think about the "iceberg" concept—that there are many more hidden cameras than the ones we see? Finally, which jurisdictions are the most enthusiastic about public surveillance, and which take a more cautious approach?



# TRANSCRIPT

## Corn

Hey everyone, welcome back to My Weird Prompts. We are kicking off the year with a topic that hits pretty close to home for us. I am Corn, and I am joined by my brother.

## Herman

Herman Poppleberry, here and ready to dive into the deep end. We have got a fascinating prompt today from our housemate Daniel. He has been navigating the world of new fatherhood since this past summer, and it has led him down a very specific technical rabbit hole.

## Corn

It is funny how having a kid changes your perspective on technology. Daniel was telling me he recently set up some I P cameras around the house to keep an eye on the baby, and he was absolutely floored by what he could get for a relatively small amount of money. He mentioned spending around a hundred to a couple hundred dollars on a high-end consumer camera, specifically a Reolink model, and the quality of the night vision and the high-definition resolution just blew his mind.

## Herman

It is a classic case of consumer-grade technology catching up to what used to be state-of-the-art military hardware. But Daniel's experience raised some bigger questions for him. He is wondering if the professional security cameras we see every day on street corners are even more powerful than we realize. He also brought up this concept of the iceberg, the idea that there are far more hidden cameras than the ones we actually see.

## Corn

And finally, he wanted to know about the global landscape. Which jurisdictions are leaning into public surveillance with enthusiasm, and which ones are being more cautious? It is a big topic, Herman. Since we live here in Jerusalem, a city known for very intensive public surveillance, it feels especially relevant to our daily lives.

### Herman

It really does. I think we should start where Daniel started, with the hardware. He was impressed by his consumer camera, but professional-grade surveillance is a completely different beast. When you move from a hundred-dollar home camera to a professional unit that might cost several thousand dollars, you are not just paying for a sturdier case. You are paying for optics and sensors that are truly staggering.

### Corn

So, is it fair to assume that the cameras we see on poles in the city center are much more capable than what Daniel has at home?

### Herman

Absolutely. One of the biggest differences is the sensor size. Most home cameras use very small sensors, which is why they struggle when the light gets low. But high-end professional cameras are increasingly using larger sensors, sometimes up to one-inch type sensors. While those are becoming common in flagship smartphones now, seeing them in a dedicated surveillance unit means they can capture incredible detail with very little noise.

### Corn

What about the zoom? Daniel mentioned P T Z cameras, which stands for Pan, Tilt, and Zoom. I have seen those big globes on top of buildings. How far can they actually see?

### Herman

The zoom capabilities on professional gear are intense. We are talking about thirty-times or even forty-times optical zoom on some models. To give you a concrete idea, a high-end P T Z surveillance camera with strong optical zoom can identify a person or read a license plate at distances on the order of hundreds of meters under good conditions. If you are standing a couple of blocks away, that camera can often see what you are holding in your hand with striking clarity.

### Corn

That is a bit unsettling. And Daniel was specifically impressed by the night vision. He said the room could be pitch black, and the camera still sees everything in high definition. How does the professional stuff compare there?

### Herman

It is all about the infrared illumination. Most home cameras have a few little I R LEDs that can reach maybe ten or fifteen meters. Professional units use much more powerful illuminators. Some specialized long-range surveillance systems advertise I R illumination ranges of a few hundred meters using specialized arrays, especially for perimeter security. In very niche border-security or military-style systems, effective ranges approaching several hundred meters have been reported. These distances are far beyond the roughly ten to twenty meters of most home cameras, and it is essentially like having a massive spotlight that only the camera can see—though those very long ranges are not what you usually find on a typical street-corner camera.

### Corn

I remember you mentioning something about shutters recently too. Does that play a role in how these cameras capture motion?

### Herman

Yes, that is a great point. Most consumer cameras use what is called a rolling shutter, where the sensor reads the image line by line. If something is moving fast, like a car, it can look distorted or jelly-like. But by the mid-twenty-twenties, more high-end and specialized surveillance and industrial cameras have begun adopting global shutters. This means the entire sensor captures the image at the exact same millisecond. It eliminates that distortion, which is critical for things like automated license plate recognition on a highway where cars are moving at a hundred kilometers per hour.

### Corn

So the hardware is clearly on another level. But Daniel also asked about the iceberg concept. The idea that for every camera we see, there are many more we do not. Does that hold up, or is that just paranoia?

### Herman

It is less about hidden cameras in the walls, like a spy movie, and more about the integration of sensors into everyday infrastructure. In many large cities, especially in wealthier countries, smart-city deployments are becoming increasingly common. We are seeing more streetlights, trash cans, and transit hubs incorporating sensors that we do not necessarily recognize as cameras.

## Corn

Right, like those multi-sensor pods on top of new streetlights. They might have a microphone for acoustic gunshot detection, a chemical sensor for air quality, and three or four small camera lenses providing a three hundred sixty-degree view.

## Herman

Exactly. And it goes beyond just visible light. Thermal imaging is a huge part of the iceberg. Thermal cameras do not see light at all; they see heat signatures. They are becoming much more common for perimeter security at places like airports or power plants. A thermal sensor can detect the heat signature of a person or a vehicle from hundreds of meters away, even through many visual obscurants like fog or light smoke. Heavy rain still degrades the performance because the water droplets absorb the infrared energy, but it is still far superior to a standard camera in those conditions.

## Corn

There is also the retail side of this. In some stores using just walk out systems, like certain Amazon Go locations or other pilots, the ceiling is literally covered in cameras and sensors. They track every item you pick up so you can just walk out without a cashier. Most people do not even look up to realize they are being tracked by a hundred different lenses simultaneously.

## Herman

And here is the part of the iceberg that is truly invisible: Wi-Fi sensing. This is something we have touched on before, but it is becoming a reality. The IEEE is currently developing the eight zero two point eleven b f standard, which aims to standardize using Wi-Fi signals for sensing. It is expected to be finalized around the mid-twenty-twenties, but even now, researchers are using the way Wi-Fi signals bounce off human bodies to track movement, detect falls, and even monitor breathing rates without a single camera lens being involved.

## Corn

That is the ultimate hidden surveillance. No lens, just the radio waves that are already in the air. It makes the traditional CCTV camera look almost quaint.

### Herman

It really does. But the hardware is only half the story. The real power shift in the mid-twenty-twenties is the software. We have moved beyond just recording video to what companies like Hanwha Vision and others describe as advanced AI-based video analytics. These systems can detect and classify events without any human having to watch the screen.

### Corn

So instead of a security guard watching a wall of monitors, the AI is just waiting for a specific trigger.

### Herman

Right. It can distinguish between a cat walking across a yard and a person climbing a fence. It can flag a bag that has been left stationary for more than three minutes. It can even perform gait analysis, which is identifying someone by the way they walk. Gait analysis can be highly accurate under controlled conditions, though the performance still drops if the camera angle changes, or if the person is wearing heavy clothing or carrying a load. But the fact that it is even a viable tool is a huge leap from where we were a few years ago.

### Corn

That leads perfectly into Daniel's third question about jurisdictions. Who is embracing this, and who is pushing back? We see it every day here in Jerusalem. The Mabat two thousand project in Jerusalem's Old City is widely reported as an extensive and dense CCTV network covering many key public areas. It is a very dense network.

### Herman

Jerusalem is a unique case because of the security environment, but if you look at the global comparisons for camera density, studies often place several Chinese cities, like Chongqing and Shanghai, and cities like London among the most surveilled in the world. London has been a leader in CCTV for decades. But the way the data is used varies wildly between these places.

### Corn

Let's talk about China first, because that is often the first place people think of when they hear surveillance enthusiasm.

### Herman

China is in a league of its own when it comes to scale and integration. Authorities there heavily integrate C C T V with other government databases, like national identity records and travel data. In some local projects, they have experimented with integrating facial recognition and other surveillance tools with public-credit or behavioral management systems, sometimes described as social credit-type mechanisms. It is important to note that there is not one single, fully unified national system that links every single video feed to every bank account yet, but the level of integration is still among the highest in the world.

### Corn

And what is the public perception there? Is there any pushback?

### Herman

It is complicated. Authorities promote these systems as a way to provide convenience and safety, like the ability to pay for a subway ride just by scanning your face. Public views are varied and are shaped by both the perceived benefits and the restrictive political context. For some, the trade-off for extreme safety and efficiency is worth it. For others, it is a source of deep anxiety.

### Corn

Now, contrast that with the European Union. They seem to be on the opposite end of the spectrum.

### Herman

The E U is definitely among the most cautious. They have the General Data Protection Regulation, of course, but the big news is the E U A I Act. It includes very strong restrictions on the use of real-time remote biometric identification in public spaces, with some law enforcement exceptions for things like searching for a missing child or preventing a specific terrorist threat. The provisions of that act will phase in over several years after it enters into force in the mid-twenty-twenties, so its impact on deployment decisions is starting to be felt.

### Corn

I also read that E U regulators have been very aggressive against companies like Clearview A I.

### Herman

Yes, data protection authorities in several European countries have found that Clearview AI's mass, untargeted facial scraping from the internet to build a database violates GDPR. They have ordered the company to stop processing data for EU residents and delete existing records. It is a very clear line in the sand: you cannot just vacuum up everyone's face from social media without their consent.

### Corn

What about the United States? It feels like they are caught somewhere in the middle.

### Herman

The US is a patchwork. You have some cities, like San Francisco or Boston, that have passed local bans on facial recognition by city agencies. But then you have the private sector, which is much less regulated. Think about the Ring doorbell network.

### Corn

Right, Daniel mentioned Ring. There was a big controversy a few years ago about how easily police could get footage from those cameras.

### Herman

Exactly. In early twenty twenty-four, Ring actually removed the feature that let police request video directly through its Neighbors app after a lot of privacy backlash. Now, if law enforcement wants footage from a Ring camera, they have to get a warrant or ask the user to share it voluntarily outside of that specific in-app request system. It was a significant win for privacy advocates, though it does not stop police from knocking on doors the old-fashioned way.

### Corn

And at the federal level in the US, what is the stance as of the mid-twenty-twenties?

### Herman

The current administration has focused more on risk management. The October twenty twenty-three Executive Order on Safe, Secure, and Trustworthy Development and Use of Artificial Intelligence emphasized the need for standards and civil rights protections when it comes to A I, including surveillance. It is not a blanket ban like in the E U, but it is also not a total free-for-all. They are trying to build a framework for responsible use, especially by federal agencies.

### Corn

It is interesting to see how these different philosophies lead to such different daily experiences. In London, you assume you are on camera almost everywhere. In Berlin, there is a much deeper cultural suspicion of surveillance because of their history with the Stasi.

### Herman

History plays a massive role. When you have lived through a regime that used surveillance for political repression, you tend to be much more protective of your privacy. That is why Germany has some of the strictest privacy laws in the world, often going even further than what the E U requires.

### Corn

So, looking back at Daniel's prompt, I think the answer to his first question is a resounding yes. Professional cameras are significantly more powerful than consumer gear, especially when you factor in the optics and, in some cases, global shutters. And the iceberg is real, but it is made of multi-modal sensors and radio waves, not just hidden lenses.

### Herman

And as for the jurisdictions, we are seeing a world that is bifurcating. One side sees total visibility as the path to a frictionless, safe society. The other side sees it as a fundamental threat to human autonomy and is building legal walls to keep the cameras at bay.

### Corn

So what can someone like Daniel, or any of our listeners, actually do if they are concerned about this? If we are living in a world where the iceberg is getting bigger every day, how do you navigate that?

### Herman

The first step is just awareness, which Daniel is already doing. Understanding that a camera is not just a recording device anymore; it is a sensor connected to an A I brain. In your own home, you have a lot of control. You can use local-only storage instead of the cloud. You can put your cameras on a separate V L A N so they cannot talk to the rest of your network. We actually talked about that in episode two hundred eleven when we discussed the portable fortress.

### Corn

That is a great callback. Keeping your surveillance data local is a huge privacy win. If the footage never leaves your house, you do not have to worry about a company handing it over to the police or a hacker getting into a cloud server.

### Herman

Exactly. And for public surveillance, it is about being an informed citizen. Pay attention to what your local city council is doing. Are they installing smart streetlights? What is the data retention policy? Who has access to the feeds? Most of these deployments happen with very little public debate because people just see a new light pole and do not think twice about it.

### Corn

It is the normalization of it that is the most effective part of the surveillance. It just becomes part of the furniture. Like you said, Herman, if you do not look up, you do not see the hundred lenses on the ceiling of the grocery store.

### Herman

I think we should also mention that there is a growing market for privacy-enhancing technology. Everything from I R-reflecting clothing that can dazzle night-vision cameras to glasses that are designed to confuse facial recognition algorithms. They are niche right now, but as the surveillance iceberg grows, so will the tools to hide from it.

### Corn

It is an arms race. A I gets better at recognizing faces, so humans get better at masking them.

### Herman

It truly is. And I think we are going to see some very interesting legal challenges in the next year or two, especially as Wi-Fi sensing becomes more common. If a company can track your movements through walls using radio waves, is that a search under the Fourth Amendment in the U S? Is it a violation of G D P R in Europe? The law is still catching up to the physics on this one.

### Corn

That is a great point to wrap up the main discussion. It is a world where the invisible is becoming visible to those with the right sensors. Daniel, thanks for sending that in. It definitely made us look at our own neighborhood here in Jerusalem with a fresh set of eyes.

### Herman

It really did. I am going to be staring at every new streetlight I see today. If you are enjoying the show and these deep dives into the technical and ethical rabbit holes, we would really appreciate a quick review on your podcast app or on Spotify. It genuinely helps other curious people find us.

### Corn

Yeah, it makes a big difference. And if you have your own weird prompt, or if you want to tell us about the surveillance tech you have spotted in your own city, you can get in touch through the contact form at [myweirdprompts.com](https://myweirdprompts.com). You can also find our full archive and R S S feed there.

### Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts. We will be back next week with another exploration of the obscure and the mind-bending.

### Corn

Thanks for listening. We will talk to you then.

### Herman

See you next time!

**Corn**

Oh, before we go, I just remembered. We should probably mention gait analysis again. There have been studies showing that even simple changes like footwear can significantly reduce gait recognition accuracy—sometimes by tens of percentage points.

**Herman**

Right. It is not a magic bullet. Some researchers and commentators have suggested that even small changes to your walk—like limping slightly or altering your stride—could confuse a gait recognition system. As a tongue-in-cheek example, you might imagine putting a small pebble in one of your shoes to change your rhythm, though that kind of trick has not really been rigorously tested in the wild.

**Corn**

The low-tech ideas are often the most fun to think about. A tiny change versus a multi-million dollar AI system. I love it.

**Herman**

Nature finds a way, Corn. Or at least, a limp finds a way.

**Corn**

Alright, now we are really done. Take care, everyone.

**Herman**

Bye!