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Monitors

Abstract

A room lit by a bank of monitors. Two technicians, Ross and Andy, watch the progress of the subjects. If the subjects perform outside the performance parameters, there are a number of contingency strategies in the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) manual to which Ross and Andy must refer.

Keywords

monitors, punishment, subjects, correction, eyes



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June 17, 2011

Monitors

by Ryan Boudinot

I.

A room lit by a bank of monitors. Two technicians, Ross and Andy, watch the progress of the subjects. If the subjects perform outside the performance parameters, there are a number of contingency strategies in the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) manual to which Ross and Andy must refer.

Ross and Andy are males between the ages of 25 and 40. Both wear the codified uniforms of their positions as technicians. They intently watch the subjects who are themselves performing monitoring activities, observing the activities of certain sub-subjects. It is difficult for Ross and Andy to make out the activities of these sub-subjects, as Ross and Andy do not have direct access to what their own subjects are watching on their (the subjects') monitors. Not that Ross and Andy haven't tried. They have squinted and pressed their noses against their monitors trying to make out what the sub-subjects are doing on the monitors their subjects are viewing.

Occasionally one of the subjects violates their Personal Performance Parameters and Ross and Andy must refer to the SOPs for the appropriate contingency strategy. These contingencies consist solely of referring to the appropriate escalation pathway and submitting an alert, after which corrective action is taken. When corrective action is taken, the monitor displaying the subject in question goes blank, or is supposed to. Ross and Andy have postulated that their equipment needs replacing because occasionally the monitor view has been left on while a particular corrective action is taking place. Corrective actions can be as simple as a Corrective Referee visiting the subject and talking to them a short while, or perhaps giving them some medicine. Twice Ross and Andy have witnessed a Corrective Referee discipline a subject with violence. They have never seen outright termination, but they have seen restored monitor views showing just an empty, disheveled room, and in one case a custodian cleaning a bloody hand print off a wall.

Ross thinks these sightings are accidental, but Andy has a theory that they have been purposely shown the outcome of their taking the appropriate contingency strategy with regard to their subjects performing outside their Personal Performance Parameters. Andy is of the opinion that being able to infer the nature of a more intense kind of corrective action has made them—Ross and Andy—better performers.

Ross finds this hard to believe, and notes that they aren't even being observed.

Andy challenges Ross on this point. How does Ross know they are not being observed?

Ross notes that they certainly have never had a visit from a Corrective Referee, which would prove that they were being monitored.

Exactly, Andy says, because they have never deviated from their Personal Performance Parameters. So the only way to determine whether they are being observed is to violate them.

Ross thinks this is a ridiculous plan and refuses to go along with it. Andy says that Ross secretly believes he is being observed and is afraid of corrective action, that he has spent countless hours in this room soldering in his mind a connection between deviating from the Parameters and

receiving correction. But if they are not being observed, as Ross claims, they have nothing to fear.

So Andy reaches out and turns off a monitor. They have watched their subjects perform this very action, for which they received stern words from Corrective Referees. Ross asks Andy to turn the monitor back on. An argument ensues, and perhaps driven by boredom, Ross struggles with Andy physically and strikes him with his fist, then turns the monitor back on. Andy slowly rises from the floor, wiping blood off his lip, and makes a pointed comment about how Ross would make a great Corrective Referee.

A few minutes pass wordlessly as they observe the subjects on their monitors. Then there is a knock on the door and both technicians jump, startled. They typically—actually never—get visitors. Andy opens the door and the Corrective Referee appears, seemingly proving Andy's theory. He wears the suit and the tidy hair of all Corrective Referees, and his tie is decorated with little cartoon characters. There are only two chairs in the place, so Andy yields his and leans against the table their monitors sit on. It is meant to be a casual posture, but his arms are crossed and it is clear he is having troubling thoughts.

Say, the Corrective Referee says, I know things can get a little uncomfortable here with the close quarters and all. You fellows have a real tough job, and hey, it's only human that from time to time nerves get frayed. I'm here to help. So say, tell you what, I've got a couple cards with entertainment codes I'd like to give you. Here, take them, use them in your rooms tonight. You know, relax. I understand there's a great batch of new releases. And if you need anything else, feel free to contact me per the appropriate contingencies. Buck up. You guys are doing a fabulous job.

The Corrective Referee leaves and seems to take with him whatever animosity Ross and Andy shared in that brief, explosive moment. It goes without saying that they are indeed being observed, though via what means it's hard to surmise. They survey the walls and ceiling, trying not to be conspicuous, knowing they are being observed in the act of trying to determine how they're being observed. Ultimately, the technology is too sophisticated for them to detect. What would come of finding the miniature cameras anyway? If they were to locate them and obscure them they would certainly be violating the their own Personal Performance Parameters.

The end of their shift finally comes and both technicians retreat to their private rooms, eat, and enter their respective entertainment codes. Andy settles on an entertainment in which the righteous prevail and the wicked are vanquished swiftly and without prejudice. Ross watches an entertainment about a big dog and how it disrupts one family's routines with hilarious results.

Both technicians return to their work space the next day with their coffees and pastries and proceed to monitor their subjects. Ross, feeling horrible about the previous day's outburst, apologizes to Andy. Andy mumbles something noncommittal in response, and for the better part of the day, they don't speak to each other.

A little after lunch, Ross spots a violation on monitor 4. One of the subjects is violently smashing his own monitors with the base of his swivel chair.

Ross says, I believe that's a section seven violation right there. He taps the screen with a pen. Andy sits doing nothing but watching the monitor, so Ross takes it upon himself to report the incident. A few minutes later the monitor goes into stand-by mode. The Corrective Referee has no doubt paid his visit to their subject.

This is bullshit, Andy says, You and I are both one centimeter from doing exactly what that subject just did.

You're talking crazy, Ross says.

I'm crazy? You're the one who brained me yesterday, don't you remember?

Yeah, I remember. And for the second time today, I apologize. Whatever mood you're in doesn't justify neglecting your monitoring responsibilities.

Bullshit, Andy says again. He pauses a moment before an expression of surprise passes over him, as if something he once knew but had forgotten had been revealed anew. He stands, walks from the room, and doesn't return the rest of his shift.

Ross smolders throughout the rest of the day. Not only does he have to monitor twice as many monitors as he usually does, he suspects that his

inability to keep Andy focused on his tasks will reflect poorly on his own performance. He performs as best he can, and that night in bed falls into a forest of nightmares.

The following morning Andy is already in his seat when Ross arrives. He doesn't look good. He appears fatigued and there's a bandage over one of his eyebrows. He hasn't touched his coffee or pastry. His eyes move from one monitor to the next, but Ross can't tell if he's actually processing what he's seeing. The only way to find out is to wait until one of the subjects on Andy's monitors violates a Performance Parameter. Ross again performs double monitoring duty, just in case. Mid-morning he notices one of Andy's subjects slumped in a sleeping position in his chair. Apparently Andy doesn't notice, so Ross scoots his chair over and submits the alert using Andy's keyboard. As the subject on the monitor is being visited by a Corrective Referee bearing a pot of black coffee, the door to Ross and Andy's workspace opens and their own Corrective Referee appears, his shirt sleeves rolled up and his tie loosened.

Hi Ross, the Corrective Referee says, turning a spare chair around so he can sit on it backwards. I appreciate the effort you're putting into helping Andy out, I really do. It's commendable.

Ross says, He'll snap out this funk, I know he will. He's a good guy.

For your sake I certainly hope so. You can't expect yourself to maintain your own Performance Parameters if you're doing two monitors' jobs.

He'll get better. I promise.

I know he will, the Corrective Referee says, nodding at one of the monitors. I wouldn't want what happened to that guy to happen to our Andy.

Ross glances at the monitor to see that the subject who fell asleep is clutching his eyes, twisting his body around on the floor in a pool of steaming coffee.

The next morning Andy is already at his station when Ross arrives, busily typing commands into his keyboard. Andy greets Ross warmly and offers him his pastry. Ross feels relieved, happy that his faith in his colleague was correct. They spend the morning talking about entertainments as they

perform the functions of their jobs, just like years ago when they began monitoring together.

Some time after lunch Andy swivels around in his chair excitedly and asks Ross to look at something on one of his monitors. They peer closely at two subjects, except the view has been magnified significantly and they can make out what is on the subjects' monitors.

I finally figured out the secret zoom command, Andy says, see? Just a few keystrokes and I can zoom in even closer.

Ross says nothing, riveted by the image he sees on one of the subject's monitors. He raises his left arm to test his hypotheses and realizes that it's true. He and Andy are the subjects of these subjects' monitors.

When the Corrective Referee arrives with his assistants in their rubber aprons and gloves, Ross does not struggle, but Andy does. The referee uses the eye core.

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Monitors

II.

They made me watch the procedure. The eye core looked like something you might use to drive nails into a wall, a vibrating, battered machine with a pistol grip and hoses running to a portable tank/battery pack. Our Corrective Referee and his assistants held Andy to the chair and placed the eye piece over Andy's face. It didn't take longer than 30 seconds. Once Andy's eyes were removed, they inserted two white ceramic plug-like objects, from the bases of which trailed two cables. Our Corrective Referee plugged these cables into two ports beneath one of Andy's monitors.

How's it looking? our Corrective Referee said, Is the signal coming through?

Andy nodded.

All good then, our Corrective Referee said as the assistants wiped up some blood with pre-moistened absorbent wipes.

When they left, I leaned over and whispered, Andy? Are you okay?

Andy nodded.

Andy, I'm so sorry, I said, and started to cry. I took hold of his closest hand. It felt cold and drained of blood, probably from the medications they inserted during the procedure.

Can you see anything? I said.

Yes, Andy said, I can see what's on the monitors. It's like looking down a tunnel at the image. The resolution is better.

In my peripheral vision I spotted a violation and quickly submitted the appropriate alert. Andy groped for his keyboard to log some violations of his own. They were coming in waves- subjects falling asleep, defacing their monitors, breaking furniture. Thanks to my quick work, the misbehaving subjects were instantly visited by their Corrective Referees, who delivered the variety of punishments they deserved. By the end of my shift I started hoping something I could barely admit to myself, that the subjects would violate their Performance Parameters. I considered the possibility of the subjects wising up and behaving within their Performance Parameters, and the prospect oddly disappointed me. The broken fingers and black eyes that resulted from their disobedience was my reward for a job performed well.

At the end of our shift our Corrective Referee visited to unplug Andy from his monitors and escort him to his quarters. He gave us both unlimited entertainment cards. That night I watched three. One was about a kid who learns how to be cool when a more popular kid shows him how to dress. Another was a historical entertainment about Vikings. The third was a pornographic entertainment that I'm too ashamed to describe.

The next day Andy arrived before me. He was in a talkative mood.

I can plug these suckers into my ports at home and see the entertainments with crystal clarity, Andy said. Cool, yeah? The Corrective Ref says pretty soon I'll be allowed to hook these things into a video camera so I won't be restricted to just seeing whatever monitor I'm plugged in to.

Do they hurt? I said.

They're a little sore, yeah, Andy said, but that's supposed to wear off in a

couple days.

I slowly became accustomed to Andy's new way of monitoring. The more content he seemed with his new apparatus, the more bored I became. My subjects entered a long streak of faithfully performing within their Parameters. I waited with itchy fingers for them to slip up, make some fatal error that brought upon them the wrath of a Corrective Referee, but for the most part their transgressions were minor. I daydreamt about a subject smashing a monitor with a chair or getting up and walking out an hour before his shift ended. Then I considered an awful thought, some dark and buoyant fantasy that kept bobbing to the surface regardless of how I tried to push it down. I wanted to submit an alert on someone who was completely innocent, who had not deviated from their Performance Parameters. With Andy locked into his own personal monitor view, I knew I could probably get away with it. Nobody would see me, not even the hidden others who observed me from miniscule cameras hidden somewhere in the acoustic tile overhead. Whoever was watching me would not be able to discern whether my subjects had in fact deviated from their performance parameters. There was a half hour left on my shift. I could simply shelve the idea, go home, eat pizza, and watch some entertainments. Instead I chose my subject randomly and submitted an alert for vandalism.

A couple minutes passed and I stared at the back of my subject's head. Before him a screen of fuzzed out, inhuman pixels behaved. The Corrective Referee entered and I considered submitting an alert correction, but knew that alert corrections reflected poorly on one's own performance. The Corrective Referee selected an instrument from his belt and went to work. I could not bear to watch. I had to watch. When the occasion of correction passed, my subject crawled back to his chair and pushed it toward the camera, then climbed onto it so that his face took up nearly the entire monitor. How he knew where to find the camera I had no idea, but his knowing where it was located seemed to me an admission of his guilt. Then he opened his mouth to show me the bleeding pits where his bottom teeth had been.

At home I vomited for an hour then sat down in my favorite chair to watch an entertainment about a beloved teacher whose unorthodox teaching methods simply aren't understood by the school administration.

The following day I numbly went about my work. I considered submitting a vacation request. My mind wandered to entertainments I had seen, peoples' faces I had passed in the hallway. Andy hummed and tapped the wrist protector of his keyboard with a pencil in time to a song. Then right before noon all the monitors went blank. Hardware failure. I banged on my monitor with the ball of my hand, but all they displayed was static.

What's going on? Andy said.

Dang monitors blew, I said.

I can see mine just fine, Andy said, What are you seeing?

Nothing, I said.

Must be a connection between the servers to the monitors, Andy said. Hey, it looks like my subjects are having the same problem. I guess this is system-wide.

Can you pull up a Performance Parameter menu? I said.

Yeah, Andy said, hold on a second. I've never had to access this one before. Okay, here. It says that... This can't be correct. "In case of monitor failure please continue following performance parameters and submit alerts on all violations."

But we can't even see our subjects! I said.

It's happening to everyone, Andy said. Oh, Jesus.

I started toward the door. The Corrective Referee and his two assistants met me. On the Corrective Referee's face was an expression of deep, compassionate sadness as he sighed and asked for his tools.

Ryan Boudinot is the author of BLUEPRINTS OF THE AFTERLIFE (Grove/Atlantic, 2012); MISCONCEPTION (Grove/Atlantic, 2009), a finalist for the PEN-USA literary award; and THE LITTLEST HITLER (Counterpoint, 2006). He teaches at Goddard College and Richard Hugo House.

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