Nobody wants that honour — Big Brother Award, Germany

Cornelia Sollfrank in conversation with Rena Tangens @ Hacking at Large, Enschede, NL

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Cornelia Sollfrank: I have a claer association to Big Brother. But what is the Big Brother Award?

Rena Tangens: Big Brother Award is a negative honouring. Corporations, organisations and individuals can receive it, when they acted particularly ‚bad' during the preceding year, and have done harm to the private sphere of citizens and customers. This can happen in different ways like active abuse of existing data, extension or a new quality of surveillance, or the creation of a structure which opens up new ways of abuse. The idea for the award originates in Great Britain, where it has been launched by Simon Davies from Privacy International.

Despite the metaphor is so well-known, we do find it problematic to use. It comes from Geroge Orwells ‚1984', and with the sentence "Big Brother is watching you", certainly many people are familiar who never have read the book. It is THE metaphor for an all-powerful police state. But for us it is not just about dangers which originate in a totalitarian regime, but also about those which come from corporations and are often more subtle.

C.S.: What are the criteria for the award?

R.T.: We didn't want to honour just provable abuse, but also to show new possibilities which come along with new technological developments. It is not about denouncing, but we really want to have an impact and cause changes. This might happen at different levels, but the adaption of legislation to new technologies is one of our major concerns. Other criteria are the relevance (dissemination) of a practice and how easy it can be mediated.

C.S.: With respect to technology, is there a preferred field you are dealing with?

R.T.: No, the categorization does not follow media, but as regards content. There is an award for the area politics, public services and administration, business and finance, communication, a life-time award for those who misbehave permanently and incorrigible, and there is a scene award for techies and insiders as well as a regional award.

C.S.: Why do you pratice this formalized action of an award?

R.T.: First of all, we want to raise public conciousness about the fact that privacy concers anyone. In order to do successful education it is important to choose the right means. The award causes a lot of media attention and the nomination of the single winners and the explanation of the jury shows clearly where the dangers ly by using examples.

C.S. In Germany we have a relatively good law for data protection. How do the activities you are dragging out into the open relate to the law? Do they all offend the law?

R.T.: We are not the ones who make sure that the laws are not offended; this is the job of the data protection official.But there is something like a grey area. We absolutely can nominate projects which stay with the letters of the law, but we still do not accept. The laws for data protection in Germany are good for now, but we already have to think about necessary changes and how the law should look like in 3-4 years, because it permanently has to be updated with the technological developments.

I would like to use a concrete exampel: In the area business and finance we have honoured the loyalty card system ‚Payback'. ‚Payback' has 12 million members and is the biggest system in Germany with partners like supermarkets, cinemas, gaz stations, department stores, drug stores, book stores, internet provider and an auction house. Merging the data from all different data bases allows to create a comprehensive costumer profile. To participate you have to sign three different things: "My details are coorect", "I agree with the conditions for participation", "I agree that my details will be used for the purpose of advertisement, marketresearch and marketing." By signing that I release the company from following the law for data protection.

C.S.: What is your personal approach? And where do you see the need for action in the complex and intransparent information sphere?

R.T.: As artists we are dealing with computers and networks since 1985. Computers were opening up a new world, and we were assuming that this new world is not yet finished, that is possible to create and influence the development. Even if you are not a building speculator it is possible to set a marking, to have impact. So we created a platform for all our activities which is FoeBud e.V.

Our work takes different approaches. We have built networks, which were free and belonged to the people who used them, we have collaborated on software to run those networks, called Zerberus, and we have provided encrytion. It was important to keep as much as possible freedom for the users so that they would not be ruled by techies.this

should be assured by software. From Zerberus the next logical step we took was to PGP (Pretty Good Privacy), because an encrytion system on a server was not enough. Point to point encrytion was required. So we made the German translation for PGP and the accompanying book was growing and growing with a lot of extra information on legislation, data encryption for hard discs etc.

C.S.: How do you finance your work, i.e. who was funding the Big Brother award?

R.T.: The first award has been completely financed through means from our own organisation. Mailing, website, public relations, research and documentation, but meanwhile we have applied for public funding from different institutions. What we try to mediate is that it is also the task of democracy to take care for it's preservation at this point. Private sphere, or what in the national census verdict has been called ‚informational self-determination' is an essential requirement for the continued existence of democracy.

http://www.bigbrotherawards.de

http://www.foebud.org