

TRACEABILITY: TRACKING AND PRIVACY IN THE FOOD SYSTEM*

DEBORAH E. POPPER

ABSTRACT. Lapses in food safety have spurred development of governmental traceability systems to track every stage of food production as part of a standardized information base. These systems form part of national and international government efforts to reduce food-security risks and control food-related disease outbreaks. The European Union, the United States, Japan, and Canada have traceability requirements now in various stages of implementation, as does the Codex Alimentarius. Traceability regulations require that, from farm (plant or animal) to fork, foods have a clear, verifiable record that tracks through all stages of cultivation, production, supplying, transporting, processing, and distribution. Traceability implies complete information control over the geography of one of life's most essential acts, eating. The apparent object of traceability is food, which seems to imply that human tracking is not part of the process, but food does not move on its own. Those people responsible at each stage for food transfers and transactions may go into the traceability database, making their locations part of the record and supporting precise monitoring of labor performance, consumer buying patterns, and ownership and management strategies. Given these capabilities, the development of public-sector traceability systems demands careful consideration. Owners, especially large exporters and importers, are likely to see their needs and fears shape the system. The food workforce may well bear tracking's brunt. Consumers, the presumed beneficiaries of the systems, will probably resist direct incorporation (and full benefit), favoring their privacy over their safety. *Keywords:* food traceability, food safety, human tracking.

This article explores the potential impacts of the global food system's new and expanding national and international governmental traceability requirements on individuals' control of information about their locations and movements. Food traceability is intended to create a standardized locational information system that encompasses all food at all stages of production, from farm to fork. As a public policy, traceability began with little public discussion, but the recent steady publicity of lapses in food safety has heightened interest in traceability. As with the other tracking technologies discussed in this issue of the *Geographical Review*, one hears mainly of food traceability's benefits to individuals, while its potentials, good and bad, for human tracking are ignored. Its proponents call it a "bureaucratic tool for food safety." Startlingly, however, it is supposed to provide full surveillance of the global food system. One food analyst described the new legal requirements of which traceability is a part as "hav[ing] more impact on the food industry than all other regulations combined" (Thompson 2003, 47).

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✪ DR. POPPER is an associate professor of geography at the College of Staten Island / City University of New York, Staten Island, New York 10314, and a visiting associate professor of environmental studies at Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey 08544.