Max Paradox

THE BRUTAL TRUTH SERIES

The Brutal Truth About Never-Ending Safety

How Everyday Risk Management Becomes a Means of Exercising Power



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INTRO

The building manager installed a security camera at the entrance. The residents welcomed the news because someone had had their bicycle stolen several weeks earlier. The camera was intended to deter thieves, help identify offenders and give everyone a greater sense of security. A month later, the manager installed a second camera, this time near the lift. After another two months, he proposed an electronic access logging system that would record who entered the building and at what time. During a residents' meeting, one woman asked why the manager needed to know when she returned home. A neighbour replied that no honest person had any reason to worry about such things. The discussion ended, the bicycle remained missing, and the residents' honesty had unexpectedly become dependent on their attitude towards surveillance.

This story, like the other fictional illustrative scenes in this book, requires no particularly malicious characters. The manager may genuinely care about the building, the neighbour may sincerely fear theft, and the woman may appreciate the presence of the first camera while opposing the installation of additional ones. What makes the situation interesting is the moment when the original objective stops defining the limits of the measures employed. A solution to a specific problem gradually becomes a justification for collecting information, expanding authority and evaluating the behaviour of individuals whose conduct was previously nobody else's business. Safety remains the official objective, but an additional benefit emerges: the ability to observe others without having to justify, on every occasion, why they are being observed in the first place.

Safety enjoys a remarkable advantage over other values. It is difficult to openly oppose it without appearing irresponsible. You can question the cost of a renovation, the purpose of a corporate restructuring or the appearance of a new playground, but questioning a protective measure requires considerably more caution. All it takes is for someone to ask who will accept responsibility if something goes wrong, and a discussion about proportionality becomes a discussion about potential blame. Nobody has suffered any harm, the threat remains hypothetical, and the effectiveness of the proposed solution has not been established. Nevertheless, the person opposing additional control must already account for the consequences of an event that may never occur.

The same mechanism finds a comfortable home in the workplace. An employee is informed that the company is introducing a computer activity monitoring system because protecting customer data is an absolute priority. Initially, the system is supposed to detect suspicious activity. Over time, management discovers that the information collected can also be used to analyse the length of breaks, the frequency with which particular applications are used and the times employees begin working. A protective tool turns out to be useful for evaluating productivity. An employee who was previously accountable for results becomes accountable for the digital evidence of their own activity as well. They may continue performing their duties just as effectively, but they must also ensure that their working habits look convincing to a system originally designed to protect against an entirely different threat.

Not every form of control constitutes abuse, just as not every desire for privacy arises from an intention to conceal

dishonest behaviour. There are circumstances in which supervision genuinely prevents harm and the absence of adequate safeguards would amount to negligence. What matters, however, is the distinction between reducing a specific risk and acquiring a lasting capacity to interfere in someone else's life. The former can be evaluated in relation to a particular threat. The latter can easily be justified by the existence of virtually any threat, including one that has yet to be identified. Control thus acquires an almost inexhaustible supply of arguments, because reality always contains a degree of uncertainty, and the future is not courteous enough to provide a written guarantee of its own predictability.

The asymmetry of accountability is particularly revealing. Someone who decides to introduce another safeguard can demonstrate initiative, foresight and concern. If the anticipated threat fails to materialise, there is a temptation to attribute its absence to the effectiveness of the measures introduced. If it does materialise, one can argue that the safeguards were insufficient. Meanwhile, someone opposing the expansion of control rarely receives recognition for protecting the freedom of others. Their success would consist of preserving something that was previously an ordinary part of life. It is difficult to organise a celebratory project review when the greatest achievement is that several hundred people can still go about their daily activities without having to provide explanations.

This mechanism does not stop at the doors of institutions. A parent checking the location of their teenage child may experience genuine relief every time a familiar address appears. A partner expecting constant access to information about the other person's whereabouts may explain these

demands as an expression of concern. A family member insisting on an immediate reply to a message may interpret silence as a sign of danger. Similar behaviours can have different causes and meanings, yet under certain circumstances they share an important dynamic: one person achieves peace of mind because another accepts the obligation to remain accessible, predictable and verifiable. The emotional comfort of one party is partly financed by restrictions on the freedom of the other.

Over time, the cost of such an arrangement becomes invisible even to the person bearing it. Before leaving home, they inform others where they are going. Before changing plans, they consider whether doing so might cause unnecessary anxiety. Before they stop responding to messages, they prepare an explanation for their unavailability. They no longer need to receive daily instructions because they have learned to anticipate the observer's expectations. Control then achieves a particularly efficient form: individuals perform some of the work required for their own supervision. Power can remain polite, attentive and ostensibly caring because it has increasingly little need to resort to overt coercion.

In such an environment, privacy becomes an exceptionally difficult value to defend. Part of its significance lies in the freedom to have experiences, make decisions and entertain thoughts that do not require immediate disclosure or social approval. Yet a culture of constant verification makes the refusal to provide information appear suspicious. Someone wishing to keep something to themselves is invited to explain why they wish to do so. To defend the boundaries of their privacy, they must disclose part of what they intended to protect. The absurdity of this situation is easily

overlooked, particularly when the request for information is delivered in a gentle voice and accompanied by an assurance that everyone simply has their best interests at heart.

This will not be a book about an all-powerful observer who has secretly devised a plan to deprive humanity of freedom. Such a narrative would be considerably more comfortable in many respects, because it would allow us to identify a single source of the problem while retaining a belief in our own innocence. Far less comfortable is an examination of ordinary situations in which we willingly exercise control over others while expressing indignation when similar demands are directed at us. We value the privacy of our own decisions but cannot always accept the fact that others may wish to remain equally inscrutable. We expect trust when we ourselves are being evaluated and demand additional evidence when we are responsible for evaluating someone else. Participation in a vast surveillance system is hardly necessary to reproduce its fundamental logic around the family dinner table.

Technology increases the scale of this phenomenon, but its psychological foundations require no specialised software. All that is needed is the ability to ask questions, an unequal distribution of the right to refuse, and the conviction that every additional piece of information will reduce uncertainty. What becomes particularly significant is that information rarely satisfies the need to know once and for all. Confirmation that everything is fine at two in the afternoon establishes nothing about the situation at three. The ability to check therefore becomes a source of further opportunities for checking. The reassurance obtained through control may be short-lived, while the powers

acquired to secure it can remain in place for a very long time.

The brutal truth about never-ending safety begins with this disproportion. Protection against threats can be necessary, reasonable and effective while simultaneously creating conditions for the expansion of power beyond its original justification. The most revealing moment arrives when individuals stop considering whether they should be observed at all and begin worrying exclusively about whether they will look sufficiently convincing while being observed. What is being protected then is no longer merely their safety, but also the permanence of an arrangement in which they must continually prove that they deserve to be left alone.

Chapter 1 - After All, It's for Our Safety

When several books went missing from a small neighbourhood library, the manager proposed introducing a rule requiring visitors to leave their bags and backpacks at the entrance. She explained that the library needed to protect shared property, particularly because purchasing replacement copies required money that was not available in the budget. Most readers accepted the change without protest. One afternoon, an elderly man refused to leave his bag, which contained his documents, wallet and medication. The librarian suggested that he remove his personal belongings and leave everything else in a locker. The man asked why he was being treated like a potential thief. He was told that the rules applied to everyone and that there was no reason to take them personally. He left the library without a book, and the librarian remarked to a colleague that some readers had particularly difficult personalities.

Several days later, the manager mentioned the incident during a staff meeting. It was agreed that employees should pay particular attention to individuals reluctant to leave their belongings at the entrance. In this way, a person's reaction to a security measure became an additional criterion for evaluating them. The library had acquired no new information about the missing books, but it had gained the ability to distinguish cooperative readers from problematic ones. A man who had regularly used the library for well over a decade was now remembered primarily as someone who challenged its rules. His entire history of previous behaviour was outweighed by a single afternoon during which he had failed to demonstrate sufficient enthusiasm for a procedure supposedly designed to protect his interests as well.

The expression "for our safety" contains a conveniently vague element. It does not establish whose safety matters most, who bears the cost of protection, who defines the threat or who has the right to assess the effectiveness of the measures introduced. In the case of the library, the interests of management, employees and readers partly overlap. Everyone may want the collection to remain intact. It does not automatically follow, however, that all parties benefit equally from the chosen solution. The manager gains evidence that action has been taken, employees receive a straightforward rule to enforce, and readers experience a minor but recurring inconvenience. The use of the word "our" allows this unequal distribution to be presented as a collective decision, even if some of those affected had no involvement in making it.

The psychological strength of such a justification comes from combining a genuine need for protection with the need to maintain a favourable self-image. Someone introducing a safeguard may consider themselves responsible, farsighted and concerned about the common good. Opposition to their decision may therefore be experienced as something more personal than a disagreement about the effectiveness of a particular measure. It can feel like a challenge to the competence or moral character of the person who proposed it. The library manager has invested part of her reputation in the new procedure. Acknowledging that the regulations have shortcomings might require separating the quality of the idea from the sincerity of her commitment. It is considerably less troublesome to conclude that the procedure is sensible and that the shortcomings lie primarily with the readers.

A similar dynamic can be observed in the organisation of a small community festival. Following an incident the

previous year, when several participants became involved in an argument near a food stall, the organisers decide to increase security. They introduce additional restrictions on items brought into the event, establish access zones and require volunteers to register in advance. Some of these changes are directly related to event safety, others make crowd management easier, and still others arise from the organisers' need to structure their own work. All of them, however, are presented under one exceptionally accommodating banner. Someone asking why a volunteer distributing leaflets must provide information unrelated to their duties is referred to the safety regulations. An inconvenient organisational question receives an answer of a moral nature.

This is where safety begins its remarkable career as an argument capable of disqualifying competing values. In an ordinary discussion, convenience can be weighed against cost, privacy against the need to obtain information, and freedom of action against organisational requirements. Once one party presents its preferred proposal as a condition of safety, the remaining values can easily lose their standing. Privacy begins to sound like a personal preference, convenience like an indulgence, and independence like an unnecessary complication. A hierarchy emerges in which a particular solution acquires a morally superior status before anyone has assessed its actual usefulness. The festival organiser does not need to admit to preferring meticulous control over participants. It is enough to call it responsibility.

The ability to imagine a disastrous outcome also plays an important role. During discussions about safeguards, it is remarkably easy to describe a dramatic scenario illustrating the consequences of their absence. It is considerably harder

to tell an equally compelling story about the restrictions resulting from their excess. A potential theft, accident or violent argument has a recognisable sequence of events, possible victims and a moment at which negligence can be identified. The loss of freedom generally occurs in a less spectacular fashion. Someone decides not to attend an event, someone else stops using a particular service, and another person spends additional time completing formalities. Each individual cost seems too insignificant to compete with the prospect of serious misfortune. Only their accumulation changes the character of a place, an institution or a relationship.

Power acquired through the language of safety is not always deliberately sought as power. Sometimes it emerges as a by-product of an attempt to solve a genuine problem. The manager of a sports centre may introduce additional rules governing the use of facilities after some equipment has been damaged, only to discover that the new authority also allows him to enforce punctuality more effectively, restrict undesirable behaviour and resolve disputes according to his own preferences. The original protective measure begins to generate benefits unrelated to the incident that prompted its introduction. Abandoning it would now mean losing not merely a safeguard but also a convenient management tool. A person can become attached to the ability to issue instructions long before recognising their own behaviour as an exercise of power.

This becomes particularly apparent in relationships where one party possesses greater experience or carries formal responsibility. Imagine an adult daughter helping her father following a period of recuperation. Initially, she accompanies him when he goes shopping, takes over some household

duties and helps organise his everyday affairs. Her father appreciates the support because he genuinely needs it. When he regains his strength and begins planning his days independently, his daughter continues to expect information about his intentions. She is troubled by the possibility that something might happen without her knowledge. Her father tells her that he is planning to meet a friend, and instead of an ordinary conversation, he receives a series of questions about the location, transport arrangements and his anticipated time of return. The nature of the assistance gradually changes, although both continue to describe it using the same vocabulary.

The daughter may sincerely love her father while benefiting from retaining her position as the person responsible for his life. Following a period of genuine danger, a loved one's regained independence may mean confronting one's own helplessness once again. As long as she knows all his plans, she feels involved in protecting him. When he makes decisions without consulting her, her role becomes less clearly defined. Returning to an ordinary relationship would require accepting that nobody can guarantee another adult's safety under every conceivable circumstance. Continued supervision allows her to postpone confronting that uncomfortable reality. Her father, meanwhile, may begin abandoning small spontaneous decisions because he does not want to upset her. He consequently experiences his own independence as a potential source of someone else's suffering.

Not every expression of care leads to this kind of arrangement. There are circumstances in which a person's condition genuinely requires ongoing support, and their independence is limited by their own capabilities rather than

by the emotional needs of a caregiver. There are also relationships based on voluntarily agreed forms of assistance, in which neither party interprets a change to the arrangements as a personal insult. The value of the analysis depends on preserving this distinction. The mere existence of a safeguard does not demonstrate domination. Far more revealing is a situation in which the need for protection diminishes, but the person exercising the associated authority cannot accept its disappearance. It then becomes possible to recognise that protection has also become a source of stability for the person originally entrusted with providing it.

The emotional cost emerges on both sides, although it is not distributed equally. The person exercising control begins to experience increasing tension in situations they cannot supervise. Having become accustomed to actively preventing threats, they find the inability to intervene unpleasant in itself. The person being controlled, meanwhile, learns that ordinary behaviour can trigger someone else's anxiety, provoke conflict or result in accusations of recklessness. Even without an explicit prohibition, pressure develops to restrict activities to those that do not require lengthy negotiations. The relationship gradually loses its capacity to accommodate disagreement. Less and less room remains for the unpredictability that was once an ordinary consequence of two separate individuals interacting with each other.

The safety argument has another practical advantage: it makes less flattering motivations unnecessary to articulate. An organiser does not have to admit to preferring participants who are easy to manage. A manager does not have to announce that he feels more secure when every

employee decision requires his approval. A caregiver does not have to confess that accepting their diminishing importance is difficult. All these experiences can be translated into the language of responsibility. This does not necessarily involve conscious dishonesty. A person may genuinely understand their own behaviour through the most favourable explanation available, especially when those around them confirm the nobility of their intentions. The ability to justify an action, however, offers no guarantee that the justification accounts for all the benefits the action provides.

It would be convenient to assume that this phenomenon concerns only individuals with senior positions, money or formal authority. Yet small opportunities to control others appear wherever someone can establish a condition of access, withhold permission, demand an explanation or assign responsibility for future events. Organising an excursion, running a hobby group, managing shared equipment or taking responsibility for a family gathering can be enough. Suddenly, other people's independence begins to look like an obstacle to accomplishing our own task. It then becomes easy to confuse our personal need for predictability with the interests of everyone involved. When others comply with the established rules, their cooperation provides additional confirmation that the measures introduced were justified.

It is worth noting that opposition to a safeguard need not arise from any profound commitment to freedom. Someone may simply have no desire to perform another unnecessary task. They may consider a particular question inappropriate or a particular procedure poorly designed. When every such reaction is elevated into a dispute about responsibility,

everyday life acquires an unnecessarily moral character. Instead of having a straightforward conversation about whether a solution works, the discussion becomes one about who is sufficiently mature to accept it. Authority thereby gains the ability to evaluate individuals according to their attitude towards its own decisions. This is an exceptionally advantageous position for anyone who previously had to account for the quality of those decisions.

Let us return to the elderly man who left the library. For the following few weeks, he obtained books through an acquaintance, and eventually he made increasingly little use of the local collection. The librarians received no complaint, there was no further discussion about the regulations, and nobody had to consider the connection between the new procedure and the loss of a longstanding reader. The manager could note with satisfaction that, following the initial period of implementing the rules, the number of conflicts had declined. Such a conclusion would be entirely consistent with her observations. The person whose presence might have challenged the success of the initiative was no longer present. The library had become a more peaceful place, although it would be difficult to establish how much of that peace was due to better protection of its books and how much was due to the absence of individuals who no longer found the manner of their protection acceptable.

Chapter 2 - It Will Only Take a Moment

A woman purchasing a ticket for a photography exhibition at the ticket counter was informed that she needed to provide her email address. The cashier explained that the ticketing system required visitors to register. The woman suggested paying in cash and receiving a printed ticket, since she did not need any correspondence concerning her purchase. The employee replied that the requirement also concerned transaction security and the ability to contact visitors in unforeseen circumstances. When she asked what sort of circumstances might arise while looking at photographs, the man standing behind her sighed demonstratively. The cashier glanced at the queue and assured her that providing an email address would literally take a few seconds. The woman supplied the required information, paid and walked away with the unpleasant feeling that she had made life difficult for someone who was merely trying to sell her an ordinary ticket.

She never discovered why that particular information was essential to completing the transaction, because the conversation had been redirected onto much simpler ground. Instead of considering the legitimacy of the requirement, everyone began assessing the time needed to fulfil it. A few seconds proved sufficient as an argument for ending a discussion about privacy. It is difficult to imagine a more economical way of obtaining compliance. An individual does not even have to consider the demand reasonable. Questioning it merely has to become more costly than complying with it. The exhibition organiser obtained the desired information, the employee could serve the next customer, and the woman avoided further attention from the