Is your printer spying on you?

Imagine that every time you print a document, it automatically includes a secret code that could be used to identify the printer – and, potentially, the person who used it. Sounds like something from a spy movie, right?

Unfortunately, the scenario isn’t fictional. Most color laser printers and color copiers are designed to print invisible tracking codes across every single printed page of their output. These codes reveal which machine produced a document and, in some cases, when the document was printed or copied. They can present a threat to the privacy of anyone who prints on a color laser printer or makes a color copy. Printer and copier manufacturers apparently do this as a result of secret deals with government agencies, even though there is no law requiring this technology, and most companies have kept its very existence a secret from their customers.

There are several easy ways see these tracking dots for yourself. You can use a blue light, a scanner, or a magnifying glass or microscope. For more detail on spotting the dots, see www.eff.org/deeplinks/2008/10/effs-yellow-dots-mystery-instructables.

The dots are printed in a regularly repeating pattern across the entire page (not in the corner of the page) and are intermixed with other printed data.

These tracking dots are reportedly meant to fight counterfeiting, but they an equal-opportunity surveillance technique that can be used for any purpose, and seriously undermine our right to speak anonymously. Anonymity can help political or religious speakers, labor organizers, or whistleblowers avoid retribution for their beliefs and opinions. Around the world, anonymity is an important practical protection for dissidents and religious groups against persecution by repressive governments. But these hidden dots could put those people at risk.

Learn more about the printer dots at www.eff.org/issues/printers

Support our work on privacy, anonymity, and free speech issues at www.eff.org/support.