

Mind Games: The Tortured Lives of ‘Targeted Individuals’

Thousands of people think that the government is using implanted chips and electronic beams to control their minds. They are desperate to prove they aren’t delusional.

The earliest Google searches for the term “targeted individual” appeared in 2004. Today, people who believe that they are targets are using the internet to find each other and share their stories. ALVARO DOMINGUEZ

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EVERY MORNING, LIZA wakes up and remembers that she’s been tortured. When she looks down at her hands, she can see slightly raised bumps where she believes she’s been implanted with microchips. She is certain that the chips track her every move, that her family has been programmed not to listen to her. She knows that her mind had been pushed to the limits of human endurance (“the most pain you could put

on a person before they die”). The targeting, the rewiring of her brain, is so extreme that she can no longer even cry.

Liza is 56, a thin, wiry woman with elf-like ears and bright eyes, an artist who grew up in the Rocky Mountains. She worked at Microsoft for 10 years and started her own web development company with her partner before the electronic attacks, the stalking, and the surveillance began. She knew it had to be some form of technology attacking her—she’d worked in the technology industry for more than a decade. She knew what it was capable of.

When she sought help, a hospital committed her to a 10-day hold in the mental ward, teaching her how to calm her racing heart without addressing the technology that Liza believed was causing it. When she was released she found answers to her questions online. There was “an encyclopedia of information,” she says, a whole new vocabulary to help explain what she’d experienced: gangstalking, brain computer interface, psychotronics. “I felt really thankful,” she says. “I felt like I was opening up this crack into a whole new universe.”

Liza, who asked for her name to be changed, fearing retribution from the person or group behind her targeting, learned that she was one of thousands of people who identify themselves as “targeted individuals”: a victim of human experiments, tracked and stalked and harassed by remote electronic weapons. There were others who understood her plight, and together they could try to take action, fight back, and maybe, find some relief.

IT WAS LATE October when my Uber slowed to a stop in the woods after dark. My driver seemed alarmed. We’d driven to the forests outside Boston, up a rocky, limited-access road with few lamps and no residences in sight. We pulled to a stop at the top of a hill with a few low, cinderblock buildings in the distance. It was dead quiet. “Where are you going?” he asked.

I tried my best to explain. I was there to attend the first ever Unity and Hope Conference, a weekend gathering of targeted individuals. The TIs

were there to learn and organize and to be reminded that they were not alone.

I'd first heard about the TI community last summer while researching an article about RFID chips—those rice-grain sized devices that can be implanted beneath the skin and used to unlock laptops and doors. People have been implanting microchips in pets as “tracking” devices for years, even though the chips don't actually track locations—they serve as virtual ID tags that confirm the identity of a lost pet if it's listed in a database. Few people know as much about RFID chips as a biohacker named Amal Graafstra. On his website, I stumbled on a strange letter called “So You Think You've Been Implanted Against Your Will,” which he posted in 2016.

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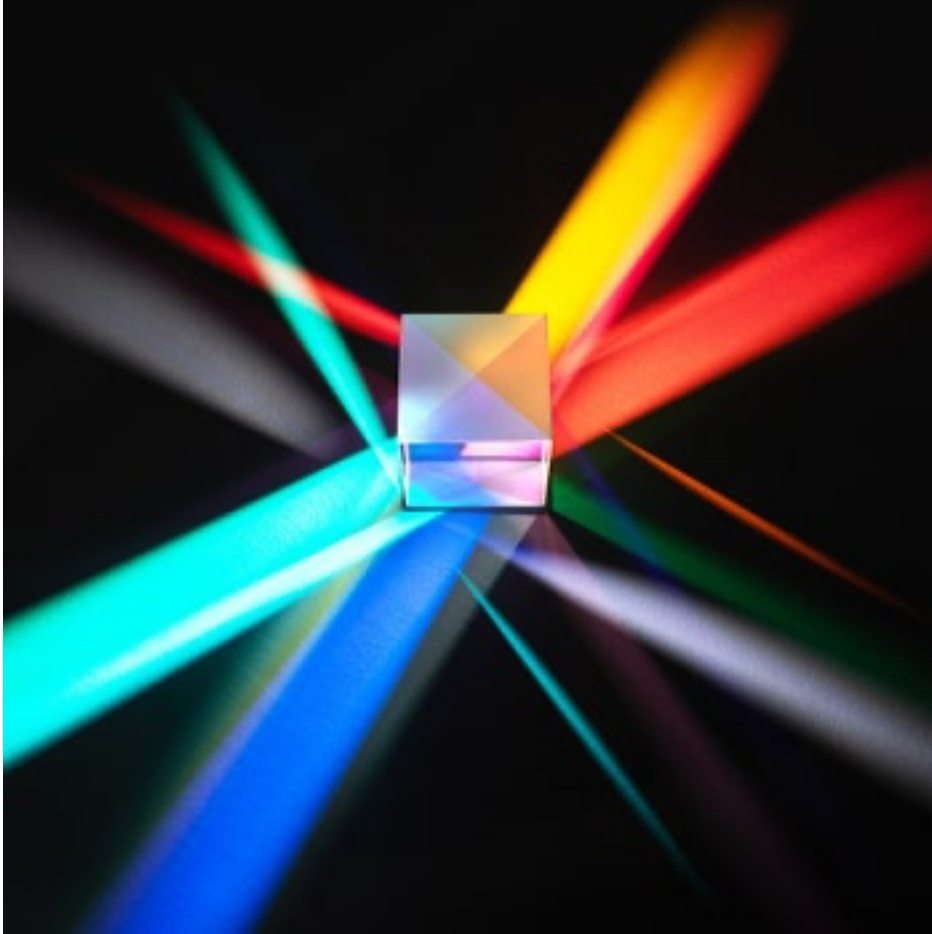


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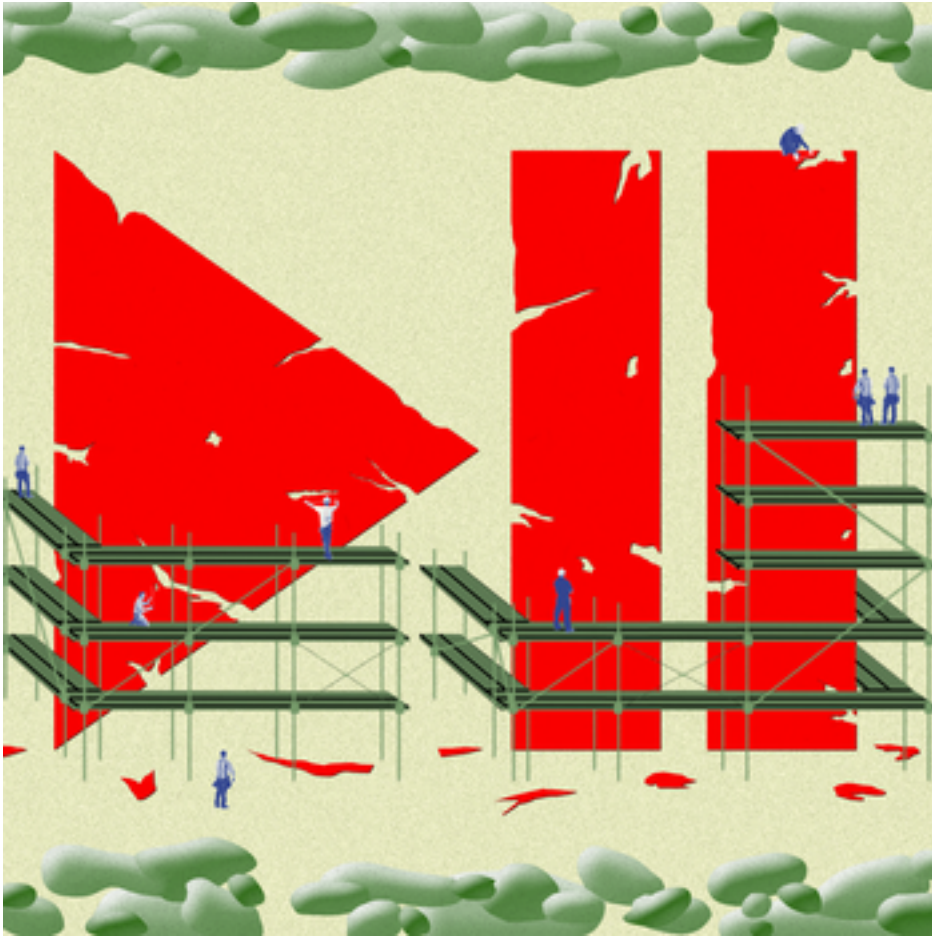


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“Hello,” the letter began. “You’re likely here because you have a problem.” Graafstra went on to list common symptoms: You hear voices or see lights—you believe you’ve been implanted with a chip against

your will. Graafstra wanted to help. He is actually a big proponent of RFID technology: He's had a chip implanted in each hand since 2005.

To Graafstra, getting the chip implants was a “no brainer,” and he loves to experiment with what they are capable of. (Among other things, his implants allow him to unlock his car and operate a smart gun that only he can fire.) But not everyone shares Graafstra's perspective. Shortly after news of his implants was published in March 2005, he got his first piece of hate mail. Since then, he's received hundreds more strange emails, from death threats to questions from worried TIs.

In the beginning, when he first started hearing from people who believed they'd had chips implanted against their will, Graafstra wrote back to them. “I was like, OK, this person is misinformed—it's a normal intelligent person who maybe has the wrong idea. I tried really hard to engage.” He suggested ways to verify if they really had an implant, like getting an X-ray at the doctor.

He pointed out logical fallacies in their beliefs, including the technical impossibility of chip implants capable of tracking an individual: A GPS microchip would have the same energy demands and battery problems as a smartphone, and while researchers are experimenting with implants that might help treat neurodegenerative diseases or link prosthetics to neural pathways, even the most advanced technology can't make someone hear voices or experience a different reality. But his logical appeals rarely mattered—the people on the other end had already made up their minds.

In the weeks leading up to the Hope and Unity Conference, I'd spoken to a few TIs over the phone myself, and I encountered the same certainty and desperation as Graafstra. But I'd never met a TI in person, and walking up to the buildings that first night, I was nervous—I had no idea what to expect. I said hello to a few people gathered outside, and then looked for the conference's organizer in the cafeteria. It was the main meeting area, and it was warm and cheerful inside: Classic rock played from the sound system, and attendees, mostly in their forties and

fifties and mostly white, drank tea and ate brownies under fluorescent lights.

They were, for the most part, friendly and talkative. A woman grew suspicious of my notebook (what's a better cover story than being a writer, she said) while another thanked me deeply for listening to her story—it wasn't often that she got to tell it without judgment or dismissal. Before I settled in for that night's program, a screening of a documentary called *Monarch: The New Phoenix Program*, I headed to the dorms. The venue was a nature education center, a summer camp for kids, but that evening the long hallways, orange carpet, and outdated furniture seemed somehow eerie. I set my bags down in an empty room and went back to the cafeteria, where the lights would soon dim for the showing.

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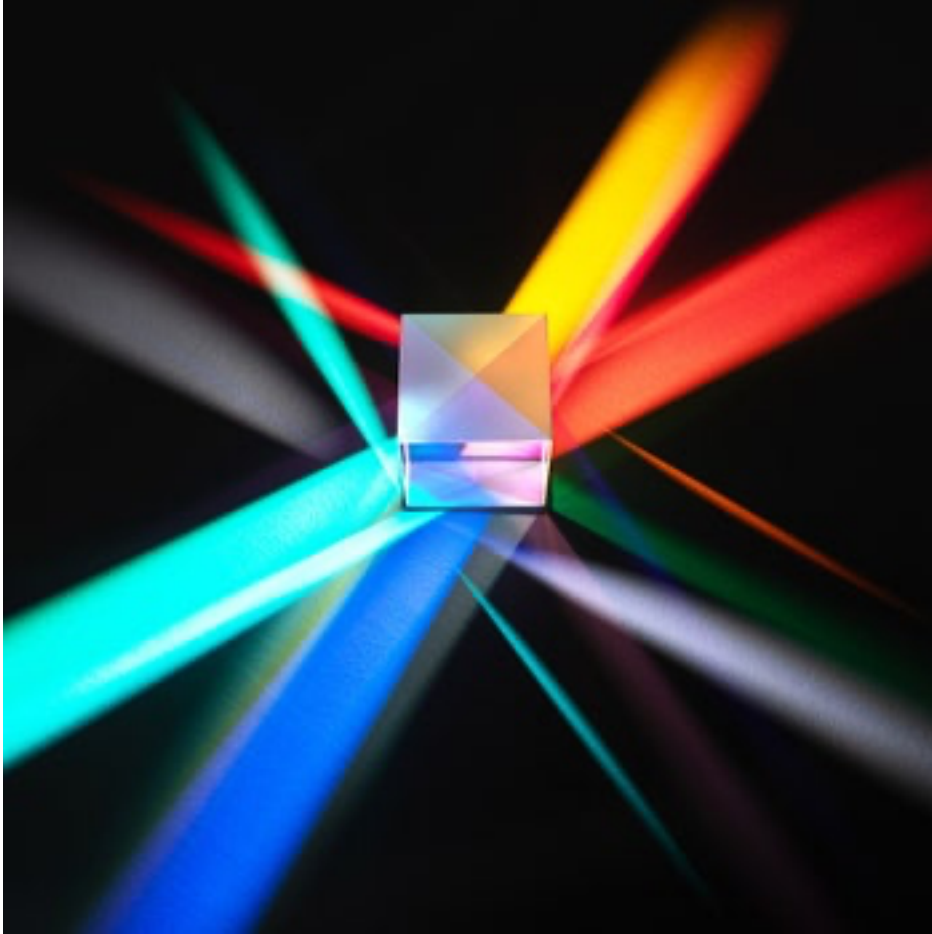


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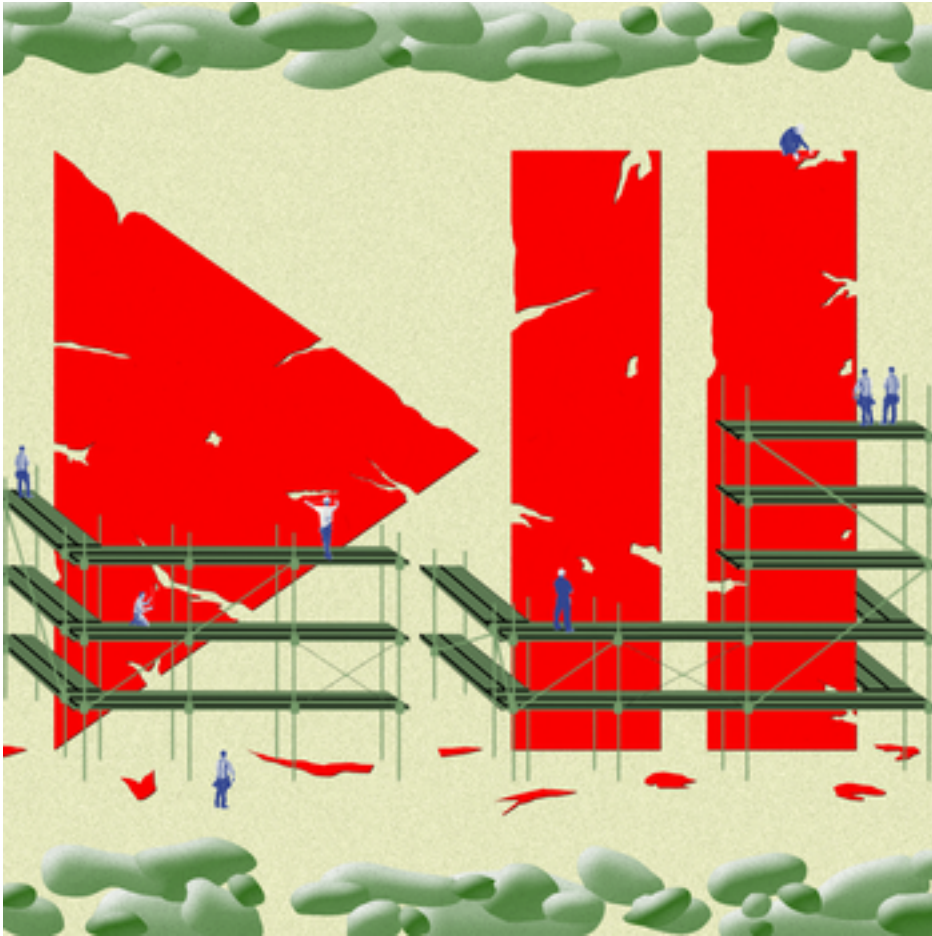


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Over grainy archival footage, a monotoned narrator explained the shadowy history of CIA programs like the original Phoenix, an assassination and torture initiative that killed as many as 40,000 suspected Viet Cong supporters during the Vietnam War. Next, the

documentary reviewed the infamous MK Ultra program, carried out by CIA operatives and psychologists during the Cold War, a true history that sounds like a horror film: heavy doses of LSD, sleep deprivation, intensive electro-shock therapy, alleged experiments on children, psychological torture.

MK Ultra and the Phoenix Project both sound like the stuff of conspiracy theories, but much of what's alleged has since been documented and confirmed. The movie doesn't stop with history, though: It alleges that the secret government programs never ended. They are still attacking US citizens through covert, powerful electronic weapons today, and the victims are the targeted individuals. The droning narrative and disturbing imagery made me increasingly unnerved, and I left before the film ended. Back in my dorm room, I stayed awake late, listening to sirens and tires screeching in the distance.

IN THE MORNING there were around 50 attendees gathered in the presentation room. The day began with a talk by Matthew Aaron, a PhD in neurobiology who was working on an article on bioluminescent fish for *Nature* magazine when his targeting began. Today, Aaron works as a science consultant in Washington, DC, and he began his talk with a disclaimer: His presentation was aimed at the general public, not the expert audience in front of him. ("By being targeted, you know more than a non-expert could ever hope to know," he said.) He thanked the non-TIs who had shown up at the conference. "That shows a degree of willingness to take this issue on and consider it. And that's a big step," Aaron said. "It's a very lonely crime that we're going through."

Through the next hour, he detailed evidence of his own targeting and the potential technologies used against him: from low-intensity microwaves from the neighbor next door to military electronic beams. His targeting began in his apartment and eventually became so bad that he ripped off sections of the drywall—spots, he believed, that emitted "hot electric microwave energy." Later, after he'd fled Vancouver, Canada, he examined the pieces under a blacklight. Around the spots he'd removed, he found "rings of fluorescent material."

The next two days were packed with similar dissections of targeting technology, testimonials, and action plans. A woman showed the unlikely links that popped up when she began typing code names for the CIA and MK Ultra into a local property deed website. David Voigts, a former Naval officer, spoke about walking across the US to raise awareness of nonconsensual human experimentation. (His talk moved the TIs to line up after and shake his hand in gratitude).

During breaks and meals, TIs who had never met before discovered shared symptoms and compared notes and theories, from who was behind their targeting (government agencies, criminal organizations, big tech companies, people in their own lives) to ways to detect or shield themselves against the technology. They were full of information and desperate to learn more. They were engineers and scientists and artists, former government and military employees, and some, like Liza, had driven more than 2,000 miles to attend.

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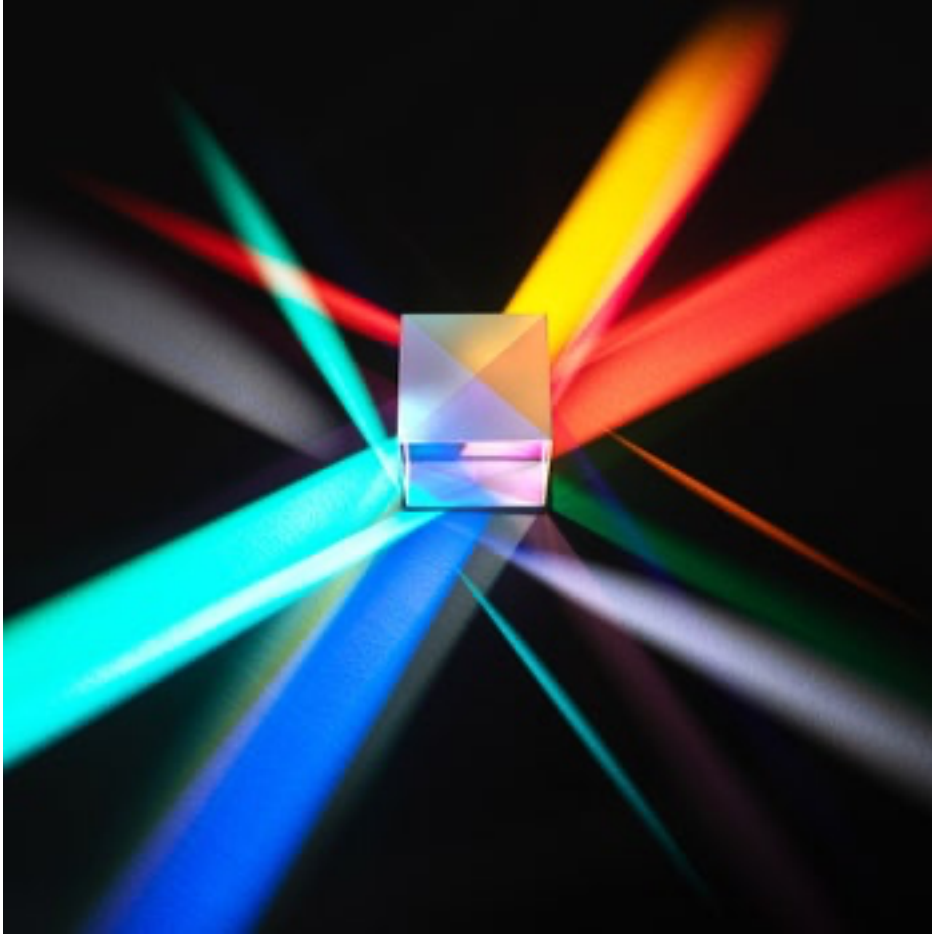


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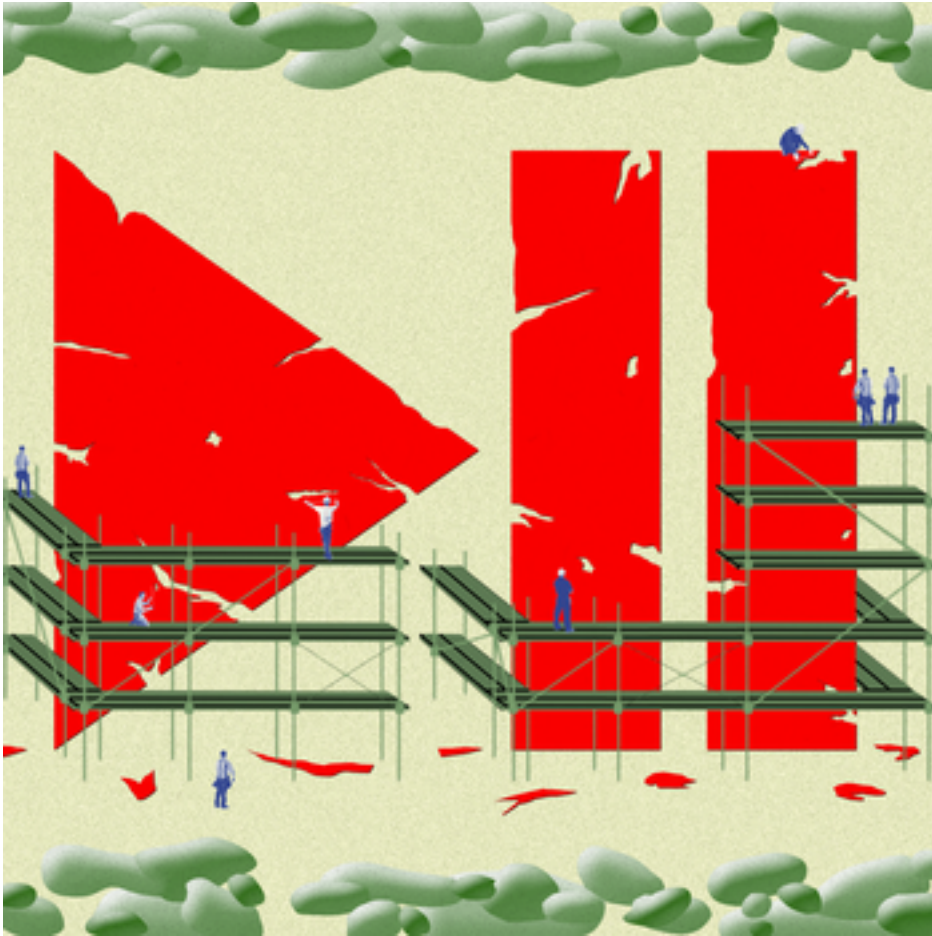


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It wasn't the first time Liza had traveled far to seek a solution to the targeting of individuals. In 2014, she drove from the Midwest to New York City, sleeping in her car for two weeks while she met with nonprofits she hoped to enlist in combatting the problem: the Center for

Constitutional Rights, Psychologists for Social Responsibility, and Physicians for Human Rights. She hoped that someone would help put a stop to the injustices she suffered. “Nobody would take my story,” she says. “Nobody would touch it with a 10-foot pole.”

But at the conference, she and the other TIs were among people who understood them, people who spoke the same language. Outside the presentation room, beneath the sun and the blue sky, if I could momentarily forget that we were talking about mind control, it almost felt like I was at an adult summer camp. And at the end of the third day, the TIs gathered together on a hill for a group photo. They called out “We are the targeted individuals!” on a count of three while the camera snapped. Getting a decent photo took some jostling. When the photographer directed, “More enthusiasm!” a woman responded, half in jest: “We can’t! We’re TIs!”

TO THE OUTSIDE world, the TIs’ beliefs are implausible, ridiculous, or evidence of mental illness, in large part because technology and paranoia have a long, interconnected history. In 1810, a man named James Tilly Matthews, who was confined in London’s infamous Bedlam asylum, drew a detailed illustration of a machine he called the “Air Loom.” He believed that with it, a gang of invisible assailants was tormenting him with gases and magnetic rays. Similar theories popped up with the advent of the telegraph and cell phones. More than 200 years later, the narrative sounds startlingly familiar. The difference? Today, prototypes of directed energy weapons actually do exist (though none are in use; the UN banned blinding laser weapons in 1998) and sonic weapons have been around for decades.

According to David LaPorte, a psychology professor at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, technology is the perfect culprit for delusional beliefs: It’s ever-evolving, and for many people it’s slightly beyond understanding. The earliest Google searches for the term “targeted individual” appeared in 2004, around the time Graafstra got his first RFID chip implants, and searches for the term spiked in 2013–14, when Edward Snowden exposed the NSA surveillance of ordinary Americans.

Today, technology is increasingly folded into our everyday lives. Some 8.4 billion “connected things” will be used globally this year, most of which are vulnerable to hacking and surveillance. Early this year, a German regulatory agency labeled a blond, talking doll named My Friend Cayla “an illegal espionage apparatus,” recommending its destruction. The FDA recently approved the first pill that can track whether a patient has taken it. These Big Brotheresque developments are worrying even if you are not a suspicious or paranoid person. For the TIs, these devices are their worst fears realized. The technology doesn’t just spy on them or track them. It attacks them.

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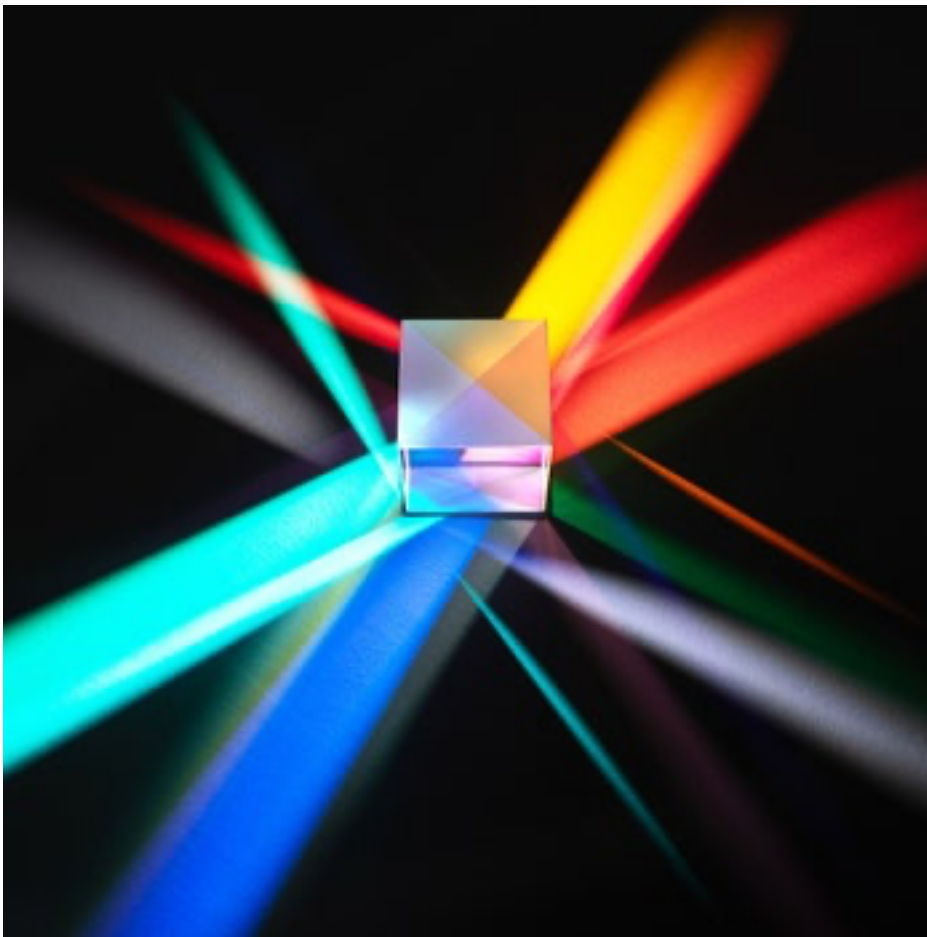


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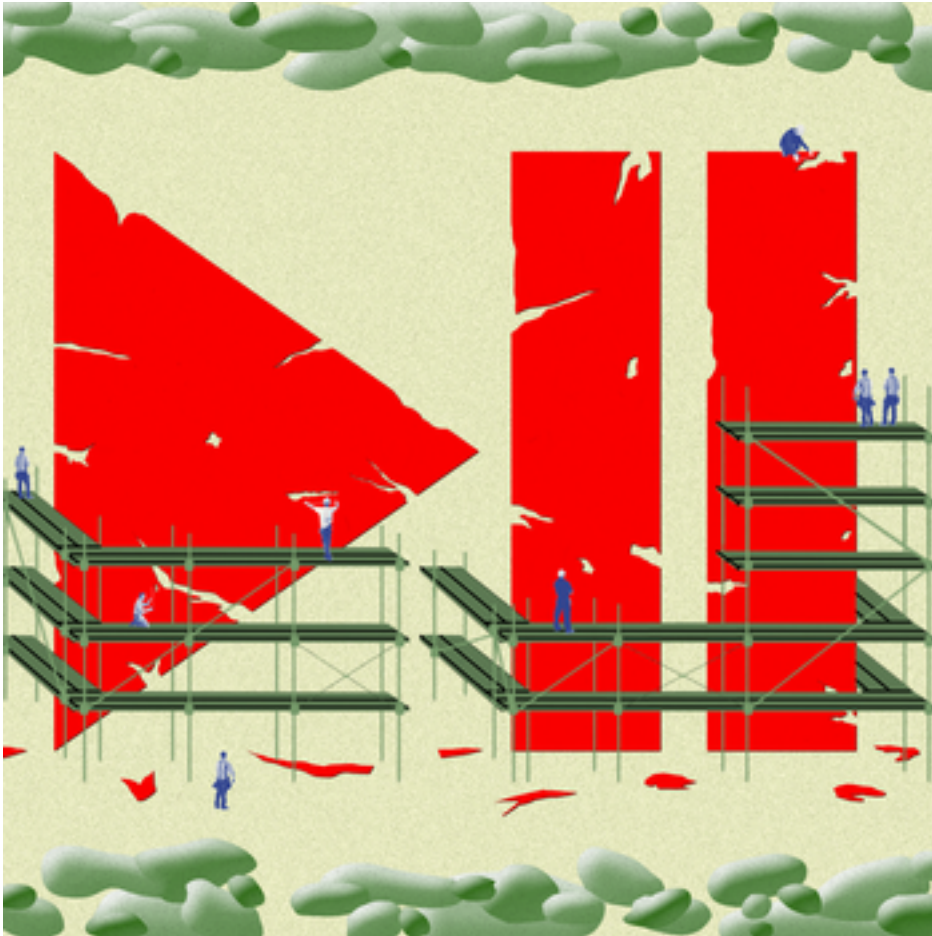
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- Finding others who share your beliefs creates a “perfect storm,” LaPorte says, a way for the beliefs to spiral. Without the internet, LaPorte

believes, “this would have never happened”—or, at least, it wouldn’t have happened on the same scale nor spread as quickly nor become so deeply rooted. *The New York Times* estimated that there are more than 10,000 self-identified TIs, it is also what lets them meet each other. In weekly newsletters and in-person support groups, they find a community of people who listen and the knowledge that *they’re not alone*.

ONE MORNING AT the conference, I overhear a TI tell another that she was planning to “get” her perpetrators. “What do you mean?” The other woman asks.

“I mean, I’m going to get them. Maybe not all of them, but as many as I can get,” she says. “Did you see that guy wandering around last night? You remember what happened with Vegas? What if he’d come in here with a gun?”

She’s talking about the man with a fedora who had stood at a distance from the other TIs, muttering to himself, pacing and acting strangely last night. He turned out to have been a fellow TI, surprisingly friendly when he wasn’t muttering warnings. But it is days after a gunman shot 58 strangers at a concert in Las Vegas, and the thought of it must have been hanging over everyone’s minds. I feel unsettled too. When I curl up in bed that night, I think about all the unlocked doors at the conference and the unpredictability of violence.

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And for days after the conference, I worry. Was the woman I’d overheard planning something serious, and was I responsible for doing something to stop her? According to LaPorte, there are rare but

disturbing instances of paranoia that lead to violence—in 2016, a man in Colorado who shot numerous police officers identified as a TI—but the statistical link between mental illness and violence is far lower than most people believe. “I’ve not seen evidence that the TIs commit violence,” LaPorte told me.

I was too nervous to confront the woman from the bathroom, unsure about how she would react. But before I left the conference, she approached me and handed me a binder that contained her full story. When I read it, I felt both sad and reassured: In her handwritten pages, there were many pleas for help and no plans to harm.

SOMETIMES TIS ASKED me if I was worried about becoming targeted myself. I told them no, but I was worried—about what might happen to the TIs and what they might be driven to do. Most of all, I worried that I would disappoint them—that I couldn’t tell their story the way they wanted it to be told.

Liza and the other TIs told me, again and again, that the worst part of being a TI is not having people believe you. Being made to look crazy was part of the targeting. While the TIs are still searching for evidence of black ops and covert crimes, their stories are just that: stories. You could believe them or not. Most people don’t. “That’s a terrible thing,” Liza said. “You don’t really understand how dear and vital the connection to other people is until it’s taken away.”

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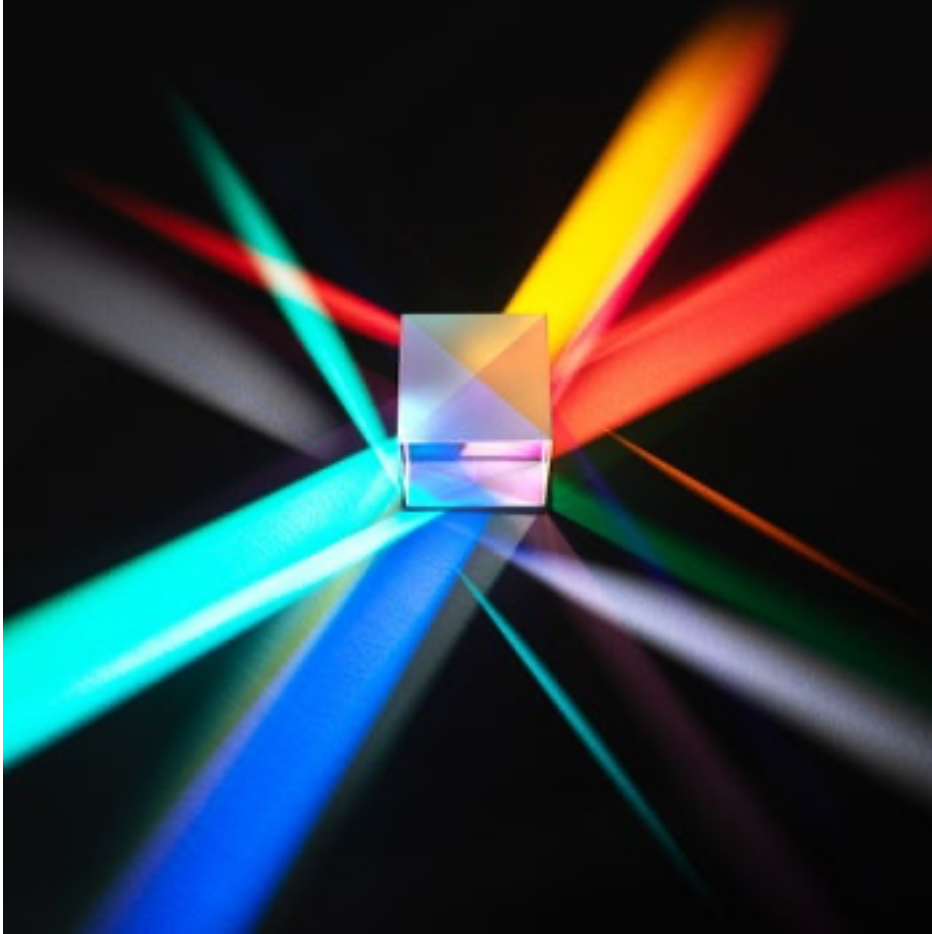


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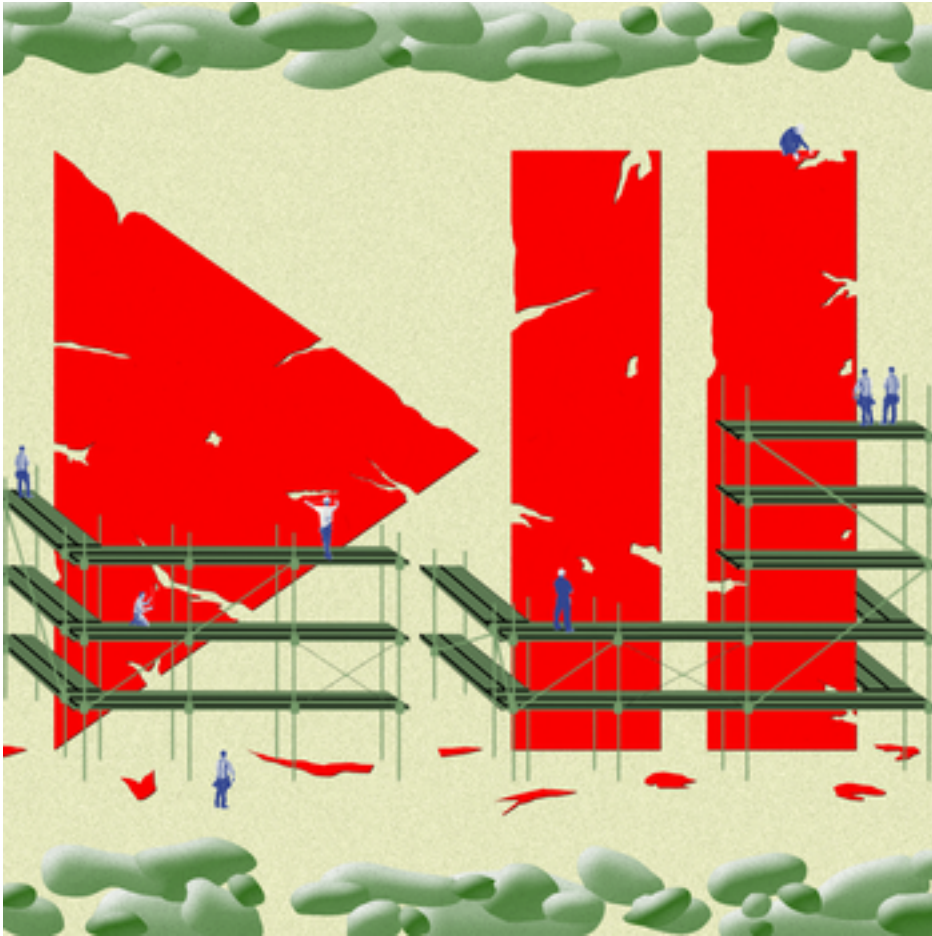


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In the months I'd spent talking to the TIs, I witnessed how lonely it was to experience something that so few can see or acknowledge, how terrible it must be to be dismissed as crazy and delusional, no matter how hard you tried to make people understand.

Months after the conference I got an unexpected email from another TI. She was an artist who wore a hat trimmed and lined with copper to block out radio waves. She was lovely and memorable. I'd comforted her briefly at the conference when she had a fit of unhappiness. Her email was brief: She offered to talk about her experience and attached what she said was evidence of her targeting and photos of her paintings. "You were very nice," she wrote, "and that is rare for us to experience."

I broke into tears when I read it, imagining a life in which such a small kindness would be so hard to find.

Liza had told me stories of her life before the targeting began: the 10 summers she spent working at hatcheries in Alaska, painting watercolors and working at her friend's general store, zooming around in a little Honda that was like the "closest thing to flying." She travelled overseas, seeing Israel, Turkey, Egypt. She spent years painting or making sculptures, and later falling in love with Microsoft: the campus with all its trees and the freedom to learn everywhere. She'd always loved learning and exploring new worlds, but the TI universe is different. "It's not about who we are, but technology," she says. "It changes who we are and it changes our lives."

Once she loved technology, shaping and molding it, playing with data in the backend of a website. When the targeting first began, she even considered the ways the technology could do good: What if, for instance, the chip inside your head could teach you to speak a new language? But she quickly learned that it wasn't there to teach her—it was there to hurt her. It was permanent, and it would change her forever.