

# A Surveillance Society

The cameras are familiar to most people, perhaps even comforting to some. They are perched high atop almost every lamppost, rooftop and streetlight. Elsewhere they are undetectable, except to the authorities. Video cameras are never turned off. They pan up and down, left and right, surveying traffic, pedestrians and everything else in public view, day and night.

## Growing Trends

You might be thinking this scene offer a glimpse of the future. Perhaps it is a dark futuristic vision, much like George Orwell's nightmare of Big Brother monitoring and controlling people's lives down to the smallest details. But by now you are aware that things are not necessarily what they seem.

This is not some grim, dystopian vision of the future, but a growing trend almost everywhere in the world-including most shopping malls and stores, almost all government and corporate offices, and many other social arenas. In the name of public security, the British have been most active of all nation in installing surveillance monitoring systems. In the beginning, they were tried in a handful of "trouble spots." Now more than 4.2 million cameras have been installed throughout Britain, and the average Londoner can expect his or her picture to be taken hundreds of times each day. Alarmed at the amount of surveillance and the astonishing amount of personal data that is hoarded by the state and by commercial, Ross Clark asks whom should we fear most: the government agencies that are spying on us or the criminals who seem to prosper in the swirling fog of excessive data collection?

Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the United States has been trying to catch up. Times Square in New York and the nation's capital has seen proliferation of surveillance cameras installed in public places. Experiments in face-recognition technology have been expanded, and "photo radar" that uses cameras and computers to photograph licenses plates, identify traffic violators, and issue citations is catching on as well. And in all cases, the technology has also grown more sophisticated. The USA PATRIOT Act, passed after 9/11 and renewed in 2006, expanded the government's authority to "spy" on private citizens.

In the private sector, cameras and computers are abundant and socially accepted. Today, there are millions of tiny private security cameras at hotels, malls, parking lots everywhere, businesses and shoppers can be found. The new digital surveillance systems are more sophisticated than those from just a few years ago. Today's technology not only can scan businesses and malls, but also analyze what it is watching and recording and, if something is unusual, alert security. Likewise, digital security systems can now record, store, and index images, making it possible for security personnel to "instantly retrieve images of every person who has passed though a door on any given day."

## Surveillance Technologies

High-tech surveillance devices are becoming more common across the urban landscaping. Although many people may be wary of these devices, few are aware that they are but a small part of the surveillance technologies that now routinely monitor all of our personal histories, daily routines, and tastes. And 9/11 and global terrorist threats have increased public willingness for add security and new surveillance technologies.

Police and military surveillance is impressive-with video scanners, electronics ankle monitors, night-vision goggles, and pilotless airborne spy vehicles, to name just a few. But high-tech surveillance has expanded well beyond the police and military to thousands of corporations, government agencies, and almost all other social arenas. As one sociologist noted, “being able to hide and remain anonymous has become more difficult ... we are moving toward a glass village in which everyone is available to view online.”

### **Information sharing**

Today, corporations and government agencies routinely share databases. In “computer matching,” organizations swap back and forth personal information on the different kinds of populations and combine them to suit their own needs. The pentagon’s “Total Information Awareness Program” is one of the most ambitious plans to combine computer databases. The Pentagon maintains that it relies mainly on information from government, law enforcement, and intelligence databases to “forestall terrorism,” but it uses other kinds of data- like personal financial and health records- remains unresolved. Critics argue that because such a system could (and some say already has) tap into e-mail, culling records, and credit card and banking transactions as well as travel documents, it poses a direct threat to civil liberties.

Similar arguments were made after the passage of the USA PATRIOT Act in 2001, which gave the government the right to “search suspected terrorists’ library records- and add them to government databases- without the patron ever knowing.” By early 2002 one study found that over 85 libraries had already been asked for information on patrons in connection with the 9/11 investigation.

Post-9/11 surveillance surfaced as controversial political issue in 2006 when it was discovered that after the 9/11 attacks the governments gave approval to the highly secretive National Security Agency (NSA) to solicit phone records of private citizens from the nation’s largest phone companies. Only weeks later it was revealed that the government also began monitoring the banking habits of private citizens in an effort thwart terrorist activities. Open debates developed over how much personal privacy Americans were willing to relinquish for the promise of the safety from terrorism. Nevertheless, the act was renewed in 2006.

The government is not the only one in the spying business. Some of the most sophisticated surveillance devices are available to the public and can be ordered from retail catalogue. For example, night-vision goggles can be had for the price of a good video camera. High-tech scanners are available that can trace ink patterns and read the content letters “without ever breaking the seal.” There is a good possibility that as cameras get smaller and more mobile we should expect “mosquito-scale drones” that fly in and out of offices and home windows, making privacy difficult or impossible. Of course, cell phones and other mobile devices with digital cameras have proliferated, as have pinole cameras, microvideo systems, and wireless video that potentially could make everyone part of the security apparatus.

## **The Impact of Surveillance**

Journalists have largely focused their attention on how surveillance relates to political citizenship and “privacy” issues, but much more is involved. According to sociologist David Lyon, new surveillance systems have expanded to the point at which they have become a major social institution that affects all social relationships, as well as people’s very identities, personal space, freedom, and dignity. Increasingly, data images- computer-integrated profiles of each individual’s finances, health, consumer preferences, ethnicity, neighborhood, education, criminal records, and other “significate” characteristic- are the “looking glass” that provides social judgement about “who we are” and our life changes. Using the old South Africa as his guide, Lyon asks, will the new “non-persons,” segregated by surveillance systems, be bankrupt individuals or perhaps non consumers.

Many people see the benefits of the new surveillance as far outweighing the risks and argue that only criminals and terrorists should be concerned about the intensification. They assert “Why should I worry about privacy? I have nothing to hide.” Lyon himself makes the point that dark visions about corporate and government Big Brothers may be counterproductive in that they produce more paranoia, fatalism, and inaction. New surveillance, in fact, both constrains and enables. Although it is unequally distributed, with large organizations controlling most information technologies, these same technologies have given ordinary people access to many new channels of participation and protest, not only nationally but globally. However, today’s increase in identity theft, spying, selling of personal information, and other technological invasions of privacy prompted one sociologist to conclude that “public access to private information has taken on even more ominous tones.”

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