How did we get here?

David Lyon examines the background to our surveillance society and calls for vigilance to keep it under control.

Surveillance society' is making headlines and provoking official inquiries, especially in the UK. Although this attention is welcome, it comes rather late in the day. However, it is still worth reminding ourselves of some of its vital features.

'Surveillance society' describes an angle of vision, a way of seeing our contemporary world. It includes not only the Radio-frequency Identification (RFID) scanners in passports or the CCTV cameras in the street but also the pervasive surveillance systems that are the infrastructure of daily life. Garnering and processing personal data is both an industry – the 'personal information economy'– and a means of governance.

'Surveillance society' has a place in the social science lexicon and, alongside other concepts, plays a significant role in highlighting some key dimensions of current social formations and transformations. Importantly, it is a useful bridging concept, between academic social science use and more popular understandings of the social world (Surveillance Studies Network 2006).

A working definition of surveillance is 'the purposeful, routine, systematic and focused attention paid to personal details, for the sake of control, entitlement, management, influence or protection' (Lyon 2007). The personal details may be of many kinds, including CCTV images, biometrics such as fingerprints or iris scans, communication records or the actual content of calls, or most commonly, numerical or categorical data.

This last type, created in bureaucratic organisations and referring to transactions, exchanges, statuses, accounts and so on, is 'dataveillance' (Clarke 2006). Dataveillance monitors or checks people's activities or communications in automated ways, using information technologies. It is far cheaper than direct or specific electronic surveillance and thus offers benefits that may sometimes act as incentives to extend the system even though the data are not strictly required for the original purpose.

Origins

In the early 1970s James B. Rules suggested that new technologies were rapidly augmenting the surveillance capacities of large organizations, and used a model of a 'total surveillance society' to gauge how close any given society might be to that reality (1973: 37). Significantly, he showed that surveillance was as visible in the commercial world of credit cards as in departments of state, such as driver licensing. This insight took a long time to catch on, although Gandy's work on database

marketing in the 1990s did much to highlight it.

'Surveillance society' was first used as a term in its simple form in 1985 by Gary T. Marx, who described it as an increasingly 'Orwellian' situation in which 'with computer technology, one of the final barriers to total social control is crumbling' (Marx 1985) and by Oscar Gandy, who looked with concern at the growth of 'bureaucratic social control' facilitated by information technology. In the same year, Canadian David Flaherty published his work on threats to privacy – largely because of the rise of computing technologies – in several 'surveillance societies'.

Confusion often exists about surveillance because of the original focus on specific individuals because of some suspected infraction of law or rule. What historically was the case has now been generalised using new technologies. Dataveillance and the use of searchable databases means that anyone may be 'suspect' by virtue of their appearance in some category that is marked for attention. Having 'nothing to hide' is no longer grounds for complacency.

Well before 9/11 I wrote that 'surveillance society denotes a situation in which disembodied surveillance has become societally pervasive' (2001: 33). Surveillance has spilled over mere government bureaucracies to flood all social conduits. State surveillance was still significant, I noted, especially against terrorism such as the 'Ring of Steel' in London or against Aum Shinrikyo in Tokyo. But, I went on, insurance logics, risk management and now simulation and precaution drive surveillance into all areas of social life.

The rise of information technology systems enabled all kinds of organisations to utilise essentially similar means of seeking efficiency, productivity and convenience, many of which involve personal data. As this occurred, surveillance started to permeate the routines of everyday life in all social sectors and layers and invited analysis of how governance works in each of them. Our Surveillance Project at Queen's University in Canada is one unit that tries to explore contemporary surveillance, and the journal *Surveillance and Society* (www.surveillance-and-society.org) is another.

Sociologies of surveillance society

To emphasise recent technological changes, however, is to risk forgetting that surveillance seems to be a feature of all societies at all times. However, the 'rational' methods of modernity transformed organisational practice, eroding informal social networks and controls on which everyday business

and governing previously relied. Ordinary social ties were downplayed so that family connections and personal identities would not interfere with their smooth running. By this means citizens and eventually workers could expect that their rights would be respected because they were protected by accurate records as well as by law.

Impersonal and rule-centred practices spawned surveillance. Business practices of double entry book-keeping and of trying to cut costs and increase profit accelerated and reinforced such surveillance, which had an impact on working life and consumption. And the growth of military and police departments in the twentieth century, bolstered by rapidly developing new technologies, improved intelligence-gathering, identification and tracking techniques. Surveillance grows as a part of just being modern.

Today, information infrastructures facilitate surveillance and degrees of integration in many spheres (even though actual joined-up services and even state-commercial integration face technical and legal obstacles). At any rate, forms of 'social orchestration' and 'disorganised surveillance' are visible today, rather than fully co-ordinated surveillance.

Understanding surveillance society as a product of modernity helps us avoid two key traps: thinking of surveillance as a malign plot hatched by evil powers and thinking that surveillance is solely the product of new technologies (and of course the most paranoid see those two as one). But getting surveillance into proper perspective as the outcome of bureaucratic organisational practices and the desire for efficiency, speed, control and co-ordination does not mean that all is well. Rather, that we have to be careful identifying the key issues and vigilant in calling attention to them.

Surveillance is two-sided, and the benefits of correct identification, screening, checking, appropriate classification and other tasks associated with it must be acknowledged. Yet at the same time risks and dangers are always present in large-scale systems and of course power does corrupt, or at least skews the vision of those who wield it.

Surveillance society after 9/11

In the post-9/11 world of Europe and North America, certain surveillance trends have become dominant and these require redoubled efforts of analysis and political understanding. The safety state (Raab 2005) now has security as one of its highest priorities and this puts pressure on surveillance society. The 'safety state' prioritises risk management and permits 'states of emergency'.

Cultures of fear, suspicion and secrecy are all prominently implicated in surveillance processes since 9/11 (Lyon 2003). Many corporations, encouraged by governments, capitalised on the opportunities. What Bigo and others call 'illiberal practices of liberal regimes' (Bigo *et al* 2007) include the growth of suspicion fostered by surveillance.

Climates of fear seem to paralyse conventional checks and balances. Not knowing where or who the elusive 'enemy' is has encouraged the quest for tools to seek out any sharing characteristics associated with violence; race, nationality, gender, religion, profession.

Rather than choosing limited and focused means of seeking suspects, tighter nets are thrown wide, using diverse databases, data-mining (for example on visitors to the USA) and de facto national registries. Such tactics are used in the EU as well, albeit in the face of greater opposition. The co-ordination of intelligence services with policing and the transnational exchange of personal data is evidence of such 'illiberality' and the spread of suspicion (Guittet 2006). Any 'exceptional circumstances,' especially when the exceptions seem permanent as in an endless 'war on terror,' are ones that require special vigilance from those who care about human and civil rights.

Not only is there increasing transnational personal data exchange, different kinds of data have come to be seen as desirable and useful in the 'war on terror.' This includes, prominently, consumer data, such that a curious assemblage of information takes shape. Moreover, these data are used in an anticipatory way, to try to pre-empt violence or disorder, rather than in the more classical sense of 'preventative' policing where detailed and specific existing intelligence is used.

The 'surveillance society' is a feature of today's world. It is ambiguous and complex, but today's context of 'states of exception' seen particularly in the 'war on terror', and of rampant commercial promotion of new surveillance technologies, invites serious social, political and ethical analysis. New technologies involve remote and automated systems, increasingly calibrated to exclude. Fear and suspicion are reinforced. Imagination and courage are urgently needed to develop alternatives that promote trust, inclusion, recognition and respect.

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