Us and them – the social impact of 'new surveillance' technologies

Michael McCahill argues that new surveillance technologies are reinforcing and worsening social inequalities.

While the emergence of a 'surveillance society' is often described in 'dystopian' or 'Orwellian' terms, surveillance is something which has always existed and is always 'Janus-faced', involving both care and control (Lyon, 2001: 3). As proponents of DNA testing have pointed out, while this new technology may provide the police with a powerful tool in the fight against crime, it can also exonerate the innocent. Similarly, CCTV systems have been used to check on the well-being of elderly tenants in high-rise flats and to protect shopkeepers from racial harassment (McCahill, 2002). However, in the context of 'criminal justice', it is clear that surveillance practices do not fall equally on all members of society. Surveillance has the capacity to reinforce existing social divisions along the lines of age, ethnicity, gender and class.

This article draws upon research conducted in the UK which examined the 'social impact' of 'new surveillance' technologies. It concludes by posititoning the discussion in a broader 'global' context by showing how the 'war on terror' is intensifying discriminatory surveillance processes through the disproportionate targeting of ethnic minorities.

Disproportionate targeting and exclusion

While everyone in society in their day-to-day living is subject to surveillance by a wide range of agencies, for some people surveillance is experienced as a totalising and encompassing force. For instance, according to Youth Justice Board research over half of those subject to the Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme (ISSP) are unemployed, with poor literacy skills, while 40% of black males have their profiles stored on the National DNA Database, compared with 9% of white males (*The Guardian*, 5 January 2006). Similarly, Norris and Armstrong have shown that the operation of open-street CCTV systems leads 'to the over-representation of men, particularly if they are young or black'. In the semi-public space of the shopping mall, the disproportionate targeting of young working class males by CCTV operators is accompanied by exclusionary strategies of social control.

In my study of two shopping malls in a northern city, (McCahill 2002) I found that almost nine out of ten (88%) of those targeted were either in their teens or twenties and that 'when a guard was deployed to deal with a group of teenagers there was a fifty-fifty chance that someone would be ejected' (2002: 135). In terms of the social impact of surveillance, exclusionary strategies of social control raise some important questions. The formalised exclusion of young people, for example, draws our attention to competing definitions of 'risk' and 'safety', particularly as in one study, school children were often excluded from what could be seen as a relatively safe environment (a busy shopping mall full of people) to the 'less safe' spaces of public streets. Also, how do those who are banned from the semi-public space of the shopping mall gain access to basic public goods and services (Job Centre, health centre, etc.) which are provided on private property from which they are denied access? (McCahill, 2002).

Central state co-option of 'private' surveillance systems

While the expansion of CCTV in the semi-public space of the mall and other retail environments is often driven by the 'corporate' mentality of 'loss prevention' and 'commercial image', these systems can be easily and routinely co-opted for traditional policing. In my study of a housing estate mall in a northern city, for example, (McCahill (2002) I found that the localised knowledge of private security officers was very useful for the police who used the control room as an intelligence base to monitor the local suspect population. Some uses of the system included: CID officers sitting in the control room and using the cameras to zoom in on a local public phone booth to record the telephone numbers dialled by suspected drug dealers; police officers asking the CCTV operators to film the registration number of cars driven by suspected drug dealers; and security officers liaising with the local pharmacist responsible for dispensing methadone to pass the names and addresses of 'wanted' persons to the police so that they could be arrested.

'Function creep' and the misappropriation of personal information

Surveillance systems also produce information which can be used in ways that are inappropriate or not in accordance with stated aims and objectives (McCahill and Norris, 2003). For instance, while CCTV systems are usually installed for the purposes of crime control, empirical research suggests that CCTV operators also monitor women for voyeuristic purposes (Norris and

Photo: Julie Grogan

CCTV cameras target young black men

information may increase following suggestions by the EU Security Research Programme (ESRP) that all data held by a law enforcement agency in one state should be automatically available to all the others.

Finally, the 'war on terror' has also highlighted issues of immigration and race and encouraged further disproportionate targeting of ethnic minorities. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks on September 11 in the United States, it is reported that up to 5,000 men aged between 18 and 33 from Middle Eastern countries were rounded up for questioning in what has been described as 'a dragnet based on ethnic profiling, not evidence' (*The Guardian*, 22 June 2002). In France it has been reported that 'young people of Algerian or Moroccan descent' are having their ID papers 'checked six times a day' (*The Guardian*, 15 November, 2003). Similarly, in the UK, the uneven impact of surveillance 'is writ large through the seven-fold increase in the number of Asian people stopped and searched by the British Transport Police following the 7 July bombings' (Mythen and Walklate, 2006: 132).

Meanwhile, the introduction of biometric ID systems at border controls means that 'racial profiling' is being coded into the software and has given rise to a new category of suspicion - 'flying while Arab' (Lyon, 2003: 99). In terms of social impact, the disproportionate targeting of many innocent individuals because they fit the profile of 'terrorist', is likely to lead to further alienation as ideological 'fence sitters' begin to take sides and loose alliances become more cohesive groupings whose unwarranted targeting reinforces the view that they do not belong.

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Armstrong, 1999: 115). In Australia, it is reported that CCTV operators in Burswood Casino 'videotaped women in toilets and artists' changing rooms, zooming in on the exposed parts of their bodies and editing the video sequences on to one tape that was shown at local house parties' (Koskela, 2000). The use of surveillance for voyeuristic purposes can have serious social and psychological consequences. From his experience of consultation with those subject to voyeuristic surveillance, Simon (1997: 886) suggests that women can develop 'psychological symptoms and disorders, distrust in relationships, fear for personal safety, and shame and humiliation (narcissistic injury)'.

The social impact of surveillance post-9/11

Many of the issues raised above on the social impact of surveillance have much wider relevance as the so-called 'global war on terror' has illustrated. Central state co-option of 'private' surveillance systems, for example, is clearly evident in the Patriot Act and subsequent legislation which has expanded *the state's powers to require businesses to turn over records to the FBI*; Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to preserve all data specific to a client or for a specified period of time; proposals to make medical records of suspects available to investigators; and an expansion of government powers to spy by wiretaps. 'Function creep' also increases as surveillance systems introduced to monitor 'external' threats posed by terrorists, are used to monitor the behaviour of the wider civilian population. An example is provided by police chiefs in Liverpool who are planning to use unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) similar to those used by the CIA, 'to hover over problem estates as part of plans for Britain's first 'yob squad' to tackle anti-social behaviour'. Meanwhile, the misappropriation of personal