Chapter VI

Electronic Surveillance for the Public Good

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Abstract

The central government in the UK is determined to employ new surveillance technology to combat the threat of terrorist activities. This chapter contributes to the important debate on the relationship between citizens and the government, by discussing not whether electronic surveillance should be used, but rather, when it is acceptable to the populace. From our analysis, we conclude that a reconciliation of state-interest and self-interest is critical for the success of e-governance; as such, electronic surveillance’s mission has to be about serving the law-abiding majority and their needs, and its scope and benefits must be clearly understood by the visionaries, implementers, and the citizenry.

Introduction

Many contemporary social theorists argue that concerns that advances in electronic technologies would lead to panoptican societies have proved unfounded (see Bauman, 1998; Bogard, 1996; Boyne, 2000). The popular discourse of the Information Age embracing direct and indirect surveillance, supported by extensive systems of data capture and retention is
overly technology-focused and insufficiently cognizant of cultural norms and impulses. The panoptican society implies a docile populace, an inactive community upon which Lyon’s (2003) conception of profiling and surveillance of any number of individuals perceived as undesirable or dangerous are conducted. Yet, there is much to suggest that modern Western citizens are far from docile. According to Boyne (2000) and drawing on Mathieson’s (1997) idea of the viewer society, Western reaction to the panoptical impulse renders it redundant by the propensity of normal, socialised subjects to engage actively in self-surveillance. This is illustrated by the ascendency of the celebrity culture, the popularity of the “Big Brother,” and similar reality television programmes, and the use of Web cams for “private” viewings. There is also a visible hunger for immediacy in knowledge and awareness of current events, and viewers’ willingness to contribute to the dissemination process is redefining the role, content, and delivery of mass media. A recent example is the use of digital and mobile phone cameras in December 2005 to capture and provide evidence of the UK Buncefield oil depot fire (reputed to be the biggest industrial blaze in Europe), where the BBC news team actually used video images of the blaze relayed to them by nearby witnesses. The age of citizen journalism has arrived.

From a Foucauldian perspective the active engagement of citizens in these pursuits should come as no surprise. Foucault (1980) argues that participants in communities of practice not only internalise and accept behavioural norms, but also actively shape members’ dispositions, and reinforce norms, controls, and exclusions. In the present context, far from being passive subjects of a regime, modern citizens must be viewed as active, willing contributors who not only accept, but sanction prevailing social practices. This is the synoptican society envisaged by Mathieson (1997) where surveillance has evolved from the few watching the many to the many watching the few. The individual as an active member of the media society has become habituated to being a watcher and is not overly concerned with being watched. Although Boyne (2000) has suggested ego investment in the continuation of this state of affairs, we would add that the thrill factor of being among the firsts to be at the scene of a dangerous or catastrophic event is also a strong motivator.

This is not to say, however, that the spectre of the panoptican society has disappeared completely. Current debates on the benefits and disbenefits of electronic technologies have begun to focus increasingly upon public surveillance. It might be argued that the voluntary participation of the citizenry actually increases the menace of the panoptican spectre, as those in power and with arguably a higher order agenda of monitoring and enforcing law and order could interpret the public’s synoptic tendencies as evidence of tacit acceptance of all surveillance practices. The machinery of surveillance stands by and is ready to be employed — but by whom, for whom, in whose name, and in whose interest?

In this chapter we query whether a society that engages in apparently harmless (although some would argue, frivolous and mindless) voyeurism has now entered into what might be described as the panoptic-synoptican era where the watched are also watchers themselves. Rather than taking a populist view of the citizenry being reduced to what Lyon (2001, p. 41) has called a “digital person” quivering under an all-seeing, all-knowing Big Brother, this chapter examines the underlying logic for the growing tendency by the UK government towards electronic surveillance to instigate political and social changes for the public good. We consider public reaction not in isolation but as a general indicator of the power relationships between state and the citizenry, to provide an explanation of public distinction between acceptable and nonacceptable electronic governance.

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