Chapter 17

Uberveillance and Faith-Based Organizations: A Renewed Moral Imperative

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ABSTRACT

Uberveillance extends the responsibilities of faith-based organisations to the power imbalances now emerging. This is less a matter of governance and strategy, and more one of the core values of faith-based organisations. These might be regarded from an ethical or moral standpoint, but the approach taken is to focus on the constituencies of faith-based organisations and the imperatives that have been woven into their aims and values. The specific ways in which such disempowerments emerge and the functional importance of making organizational responses are considered. Acknowledgement is made of the Science and Society Council of the Churches of Scotland, who catalysed the expression and articulation of these issues.

INTRODUCTION

The perspectives of faith-based organizations encapsulate most of those in the broader community, but with a stronger representative role when power exertion by society on weaker members, not only of their own community, becomes evident. This is a historically important role, in which most share. The developments in large scale databases, government pressures for a single identity, and the merger of a wide variety of data and information holders create cumulative ethical and moral issues for the community at large, and it is arguable that the value systems used to resolve these are currently neither sufficiently diverse nor effective enough to moderate these cumulative effects in a humane and ethical manner.

The fundamental nature of uberveillance, surveillance and integration of multiple identities is to create power imbalances. The special feature...
of the information and communications system’s disintermediation of this process is removal of most of the mechanisms that could correct or undo the cumulative power shifts that information asymmetries establish.

Faith-based organisations are, in the main, religious bodies, but not all, as a range of humanist bodies also share many of the same characteristics. Faith-based organisations usually have a special mission to correct power imbalances that disadvantage the weaker and more vulnerable in the community, not only amongst their members, but in the community at large. While not widely known, the Roman Catholic Church states this explicitly (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2005) in the words of Pope John Paul II addressing the Bishops in Mexico in 1979:

This love of preference for the poor, and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without health care and, above all, those without hope of a better future (p62).

This view, reiterated in several contexts by Pope Paul II, is typical of the formal underpinnings of the commitment of faith-based organisations to addressing asymmetries of power and possibilities for the weak. The new imbalances induced by the asymmetric application of state-based dataveillance and physical surveillance to accumulating vast data records on individuals are steadily becoming more comprehensive and widespread; they need to attract the attention and action of faith-based organisations, at the very least in the interests of their more vulnerable members, and more broadly by attesting to their political capacities in influencing these objectives for the broader community.

Secular approaches also emphasize the imbalances, more from an equity of access standpoint (Celeste, DiMaggio, Schafer, & Hargittai, 2004), yet echo a similar stance as follows:

... the research we call for here is one front in what should be a larger effort to understand the causes and impacts of inequality in access to and use of information of many kinds. Information figures crucially in the generation of inequality in advanced industrial societies in myriad ways ...

The approaches so far recognised to be relevant by a wider professional society are still limited, and largely neglect the shared values and roles of faith-based and even secular civil liberties internet-sensitive organisations such as the Electronic...