

The Explosion in the Surveillance of Our Everyday Lives

Surveillance of people is nothing new. It goes back to ancient times and over the last several centuries churches, states, factories, and bureaucracies have watched and collected increasingly detailed personal information on us. More recently, private sector agencies related to medicine, banking, insurance, and business (especially credit card companies) have joined the fray. It is the latter agencies, in conjunction with an array of new technologies-the computer, video cameras, implanted chips, electronic location monitors, satellites, voluntary testing, and so on-that have greatly increased the ability to watch over people, especially via electronic means that no longer require one person watching another (as was the case, at least potentially, in the panopticon). The new forms of surveillance have all sorts of advantages over their predecessors including being invisible (or nearly so), manipulative (rather than coercive), inexpensive (for each unit of data collected), yielding data that are easy to organize and retrieve, and so on.

There is much that is positive about the new and increased ability to engage in surveillance. Many organizations and institutions need information to do what they do and these methods allow them to obtain it cheaply and sometimes instantaneously. Even families with small children benefit when surveillance cameras oversee the actions of babysitters and in daycare centers. Certainly, the police are aided in their efforts to deter crime and to catch criminals. In this post 9/11 era, the use of advanced surveillance techniques may help deter, or even prevent, other terrorist attacks. To take an even more recent example, in 2005 the medical community is alert to early signs of avian flu in Southeast Asia. Careful monitoring of cases there for early signs of human-to-human transmission may help prevent a global pandemic, or at least allow us to be better prepared to deal with it and limit its effects.

Yet, with all of this, there is every reason to be fearful of this massive increase in the ability to intrude into our everyday lives and of the collection of huge bodies of information on all of us. It all brings to mind the great fears of science fiction literature such as George Orwell's 1984 with Big Brother watching over us all, knowing all there is to know about us, and as a result able to exercise great control over what we think and do.

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