The Threat of Terrorism: A Justification for Mass Surveillance?

"We are rapidly entering the age of no privacy, where everyone is open to surveillance at all times; where there are no secrets from the government."

– William O. Douglas

A discussion over the balance between privacy and security has exploded following Edward Snowden's recent disclosure of the NSA's "PRISM" program. Government surveillance supporters contend that security is more crucial than privacy and that these surveillance programs allow the government to prevent terrorism before it occurs. Though it is true that citizens cannot be free until they are secure. They require liberty and security. Security is a prerequisite for a free society, and in the post-9/11 era is dependent on intelligence collection, which cannot be achieved without increasing surveillance. Unfortunately, the specifics of these programs' operation, the kinds of data they gather, and the outcomes they have produced are not made public by the government. Hence, whistleblowers are responsible for the majority of the information. Government surveillance opponents argue that mass data collection violates individual rights. According to an article titled "Mass Surveillance" by Privacy International, "they often provide the gateway to the violation of the rest of human right, including freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, freedom of movement, principle of non discrimination, as well as political participation". The idea, however, that mass surveillance is the best way for combating terrorism particularly is unfounded. Bruce Schneier states in his book "Data and Goliath" that "even highly accurate terrorism prediction systems will be so flooded with false alarms that they will be useless".

There is little proof that mass surveillance will enable us to prevent new threats from emerging or identify future terrorist acts based on the outcomes of the programs Edward Snowden exposed. It seems that American intelligence operatives' commitment to mass surveillance is based on faith rather than outcomes. Despite conducting mass surveillance, the attacks happen anyway. First of all, there is no such thing as a "terrorist profile" and no one is born a terrorist. Although terrorists share some psychological and behavioral qualities, each person has their own radicalization route, which incorporates a complicated mix of causes spanning from political to social to psychological. So supporting mass surveillance "to keep track of potential terrorists" is a rather weak argument. The best method for identifying terrorists is "targeted surveillance" of those with connections to terrorism. In fact, someone who carried out a significant terrorist attack was already on the government's radar for a variety of reasons. This shows that their intelligence collection is actually pretty good, but their ability to act on it is limited by the sheer numbers. The majority of nations' intelligence services do not have the resources to monitor all of the individuals on their "terror watchlists". Terrorists and criminals know how to avoid government surveillance if they truly want to. For example, ISIS has notoriously utilized applications to transmit encrypted messages to one another that are not accessible to the intelligence authorities. Where there is a will, there is always a way. The UN has demonstrated that surveillance is only a show of force rather than a means to an end. Addressing the core causes of terrorism and implementing successful counter-radicalization methods is a far superior strategy.

Terrorist risks do not warrant interfering on individual freedom and privacy rights, nor do they justify loosening legal constraints on surveillance. In times of crisis, however, freedom and privacy are frequently traded in the name of increased security. Allowing the government increased investigative powers, in effect, makes it simpler for government agencies to spy on regular citizens and turns civilians into suspects whose private lives are subject to official monitoring and inspection. The risk is twofold. First, innocent citizens may become government targets by mistake and even be falsely convicted of crimes they did not commit i.e. false positives are more common than ever before due to increased government surveillance capabilities. Second, the government may abuse its power by targeting persons because of their political or religious beliefs. Hence, instead of arresting terrorists, the law turns regular citizens government suspects.

The human desire for safety is natural. However, various people will require different forms of security. Similarly, the costs that people are willing to pay will vary, and people's demand and willingness to pay will change throughout their lives in reaction to new situations and consequences. Even if it could be demonstrated that privacy violations promote public safety, people's priorities for privacy and security differ substantially. Surveillance fosters a worrisome atmosphere in which individuals being watched may feel compelled to change their behavior regardless of whether or not they have done anything wrong. People internalize the notion that they are continuously being monitored and assessed by some concealed criterion. Do you ever get nervous when shopping at a store that has CCTV, especially if the security officers appear to be paying too much attention to you? Consider it on a much larger scale.

"More than just being ineffective, the NSA's surveillance efforts have actually made us less secure," writes Bruce Schneier. The widespread use of monitoring technologies has the potential to instill terror and endangers fundamental liberties. Fear, as previously said, not only provides fuel for terrorism but also causes unpredictable reactions (everyone responds differently), which in turn hinders counter-terrorism operations and increases questions about the state's handling of security issues. We, as a society, and the security services, as a whole, are hampered by widespread monitoring.