The truth about the ‘surveillance society’

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Those complaining that CCTV cameras don’t cut crime are missing the point: these cams are fundamentally political rather than practical.

Brendan O'Neill
Editor

A senior British police officer, Detective Chief Inspector Mick Neville, has caused a storm by arguing that Britain’s 4.2million CCTV cameras have not led to a reduction in crime. Only three per cent of street robberies in London were solved with the assistance of CCTV. Yet is it really the aim of surveillance cameras to prevent crime, or do they play a more important political role for the authorities? In this edited transcript of a speech he gave last month at the Public Sector Forum in Birmingham, England, **spiked** ***editor Brendan O’Neill looks at what really lies behind today’s surveillance society.***

I want to put forward two arguments today. The first is that the increased use of surveillance by the British government, and its singular determination to collect and share data on everyone who lives in the UK, are desperate attempts by the government to make a connection with its citizens. Feeling themselves increasingly estranged from the public, government officials have become obsessed with finding out who we are and what we do, and with monitoring and measuring every aspect of our lives.

The second argument I want to make is that in the very process of developing the ‘surveillance society’ and new forms of ‘information governance’, the government is actually degrading what it means to be a citizen. It is denigrating the traditional ideal of citizenship, and it is chipping away at the free society and weakening community bonds.

This, I believe, is the double tragedy of the rise of a surveillance/database society in the UK: it is a technical solution to a profoundly political problem, born of the government’s desire to reconnect with the public – and yet its impact has been to corrode public life and space, and to undermine the public good.

On my first point – the question of the government’s motivation for developing new forms of surveillance and data-collection. Many people are understandably confused by the New Labour government’s love affair with surveillance. There seems to be no clear

rationale behind it, and as a result many sections of the British public are either deeply cynical about the surveillance society, or else they have developed conspiracy theories about what the government is up to.

The lack of any convincing political argument for instituting a new surveillance society – and the absence of any clear, agreed-upon evidence that such surveillance is practically useful – has created fertile ground for a deeply disdainful and borderline conspiratorial attitude towards the government's intervention in our lives. Some anti-surveillance activists seem to imagine that they live in an Orwellian dystopia or even in a new Nazi regime; they believe that the increasing use of CCTV cameras and citizen data-sharing between government departments must surely signal the emergence of a wickedly authoritarian, duplicitous government apparatus.

How else can we explain New Labour's bizarre penchant for watching us and storing our data? It is certainly true that, in practical terms, the surveillance/data society seems like an extraordinary overreaction to quite small problems. For example, we are frequently told that CCTV cameras are useful and necessary for tackling crime. Yet there is precious little evidence to substantiate this claim. Indeed, some studies suggest that CCTV cameras have very little impact on crime levels. A research team at the University of Leicester conducted a study of 14 CCTV surveillance systems for the Home Office, and found that in only one area could a small drop in crime levels be linked to the institution of a CCTV system.

Also, consider the insanity of the government's Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act, the new vetting system for all adults whose work involves coming into contact with children. This is an example of both the surveillance and the data society, since it will involve surveying everyone who works with children and storing their records and information on a vast database. Some nine million adults – from lollipop ladies to part-time football coaches, priests to zoo entertainers – will have to submit to a criminal records check, annually, before they receive the government go-ahead to work with kids.

This system, too, doesn't add up. It is justified on the basis of keeping children safe from potentially abusive or murderous paedophiles. Yet there are only around 500 known paedophiles in Britain. The murder of children remains mercifully rare: over the past 20 years, there have been an average of 67 child murders a year in Britain. The majority of these children – around 68 per cent – are killed by an abusive family member or family friend. Only a very small number are preyed upon by those who are employed to look after or educate them, or by strangers. Yet millions of decent, hard-working adults will be monitored relentlessly in the name of catching infinitesimally small numbers of potential abusers.

Likewise, one of the justifications put forward for the government's ID card database is that it will help the authorities to keep track of criminals. Yet, as Jo Herlihy [the conference organiser] has pointed out, only 2.4 per cent of the British public has a criminal record, and a miniscule 0.6 per cent of Britons have received a custodial sentence for committing a criminal offence. The government says it wants to have more

than 40million British adults carrying ID cards partly to keep a check on a few thousand criminals. It is this unthinking, blanket application of surveillance measures – covering all of us, all of the time – which makes people wonder what is really going on here, and whether there might be a more sinister motive behind the government's actions.

In truth, the real driving force behind the surveillance society is not a practical one at all; it is a political one. It is underpinned by an existential crisis, if you like, by a powerful and palpable sense amongst government officials that they are increasingly cut off and disconnected from the public. The surveillance and database society is an attempt by officialdom to reconfigure a relationship with the public, to engender a direct, functional relationship to replace the political, citizenship-based relationship that has eroded in recent years.

It is sometimes easy to overlook the depth of the authorities' crisis of legitimacy today. In an era of falling voter turnout, deep public cynicism with politics, and increased public disengagement from what the public perceives to be the untrustworthy and aloof world of politics, ministers and officials must feel more like oligarchs than real democratic representatives. Unable to inspire people with a political vision, today's political leaders seek instead to 'consult' us: they implore us to join focus groups, to take part in 'big conversations' with ministers, and to sign petitions on the Downing Street website. These frequently quite patronising initiatives are attempts by our simultaneously elitist/uncertain rulers to reach out and connect with the masses – and the rise of the surveillance and database society should be seen in the same light.

The most striking thing about the emergence of a surveillance society in the UK is that it has coincided with the decline of healthy political life. If you look at the rise of surveillance measures over the past 10 to 15 years, you will see that it has occurred alongside falling voter turnout and heightened public disillusionment with officialdom. The more that government ministers and officials feel they do not know who we, the public, are – or what we believe and what we want – the more that they have moved towards watching, monitoring and recording our personal information. Unable to figure out what makes us tick politically, they have sought to get to know us *technically*: by putting us all on databases and effectively forcing us to engage with officialdom through vetting systems and the eyes of CCTV cameras. The New Labour government's surveillance society is not a dark, conspiratorial, Hitlerian attempt to police and punish wayward individuals – rather it is a quite desperate, instinctive effort to 'only connect'.

This is most clear in the debate about identity cards. The main drive behind the government's ID cards database is a feeling that British identity itself is amorphous and ill-defined; that people's identities might be easily 'stolen' and used by others for nefarious purposes. The authorities feel they do not know or understand the public, and they fear that our identities – our very Britishness – are under threat, possibly from criminals, terrorists or illegal immigrants. So the ID card becomes a way to find out who we all are, and to unite British citizens in some kind of group identity project, at least on paper (or rather on laminated card). As Sir James Crosby argued in his government-

sponsored review of ID cards, the cards are a way for British people to 'prove who they are' (4). He doesn't only mean practically, when you get stopped by the cops or when you have to prove your age when buying booze; he also means that the cards become a kind of 'proof of identity' more broadly, a paper symbol that you are a British citizen at a time when officialdom does not know how to define British citizenship in any meaningful way.

Likewise, those who complain that CCTV cameras don't work or are frequently unmanned are missing the point. These cameras are perhaps better seen as totems, as symbols of government interaction in our daily, public lives. And the reason why the authorities monitor every adult who works with children – despite the fact that the vast majority of adults are caring and concerned – is because, feeling elevated and distant, they want to incorporate into their purview as much everyday activity as possible. The underpinnings of the surveillance society is government crisis rather than any clear-eyed authoritarian agenda, and a desire amongst officials to get to know what they consider to be a strange, unknowable mass: the British public.

Yet in the very process of trying to reconstitute a sense of British identity and public space through surveillance and data-collection, the authorities are actually undermining both the idea of citizenship and community solidarity. They are doing this in three important ways:

- First, the surveillance/data society radically transforms what it means to be a free citizen. The slogan of the champions of surveillance is that 'if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear'. In short, we must now continually *prove* our goodness and innocence to the powers-that-be. In the past, we were generally seen as free, self-determining individuals who should largely be left alone unless or until it could be proven that we had done something illegal. Today, under the organising principle of 'if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear', we must constantly demonstrate that we are decent people, for the benefit of CCTV operators, vetting officials, and the ID database operators. This represents a dangerous new dawn in the relationship between the state and individual. The burden of proof now falls on the citizen to prove that he is good rather than on the state to prove that we have been bad. A new conception of the citizen is emerging: no longer seen as free, adult and due some respect, the citizen has been turned into an object of suspicion who must make a daily performance of his goodness for the watching authorities.

- Second, the surveillance/data society degrades the idea of individuals as political subjects. Increasingly, the authorities engage with us, not through political debate and argument, but through monitoring our behaviour and collecting and sharing our data. This is a reductionist view of the public, where we come to be seen as a collection of fingerprints, DOBs, iris scans or as pixels on a CCTV screen rather than as individuals with beliefs, ambitions and desires. The more that the government seeks to connect with us on a technical level, the less it views us as political or active subjects. Where once an individual might have been defined as Labour or Conservative, left or right, progressive or traditionalist, today we are defined as numbers on a spreadsheet.
- Third, the surveillance/data society is likely to weaken rather than strengthen community bonds. There is a danger that heightened, always-visible surveillance nurtures, or perhaps exacerbates, a sense of community complacency today. The more we are told that there is a third party selflessly watching our every move and interaction – whether it's the CCTV operators or the local officials who dish out ASBOs to errant youth – the more we are likely to defer to authority rather than take community-based action to tackle local problems. When communities are encouraged to report misdemeanours to ASBO-happy local authorities, or to have faith in the CCTV system erected in their local town, then they become disarmed and disempowered, and transformed into passive agents who should rely on outside assistance rather than be the makers of their own community culture and destiny. Far from uniting Britons, surveillance, data-collection and vetting may well give rise to suspicion and division amongst disempowered communities.

Brendan O'Neill is editor of *spiked*. Visit his website here. The above is an edited transcript of a speech he gave at a Public Sector Forum conference on identity management and data-sharing, organised by Jo Herlihy at Edgbaston Cricket Ground, Birmingham, on 24 April 2008. Next week, *spiked* will publish an essay on identity management by conference organiser Jo Herlihy.