How closely does the film ‘The Dark Knight’ mirror surveillance in modern society?

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“One surveillance camera for every 11 people in Britain, says CCTV survey” (Barrett, 2013). A study by The British Security Industry Authority (BSIA) revealed that there was an estimated 4.7 million security cameras in the United Kingdom, increasing the fear and alarm that we are living in a ‘surveillance society’. Surveillance through the streets and in public however, is merely the tip of the iceberg when we analyse surveillance in our daily lives. Citizens are being observed in ever more personal activities today, such as internet browsing, phone calls and daily online personal interactions. Time magazine stated in 2013 that in contemporary society “privacy is mostly an illusion” (Drehle, 2013).

The Dark Knight is a film series which looks at the controversy of surveillance within society by observing the perils of Gotham City and its hero Batman (real name Bruce Wayne), who protects the city from possible evil and terrorism. Batman uses any means necessary to protect the city, and not always via completely ethical means. In the first Dark Knight movie, Batman is required to save the city from a potentially huge terrorist attack by the evil villain the Joker. Batman decides that the most effective way to prevent this attack is by accessing maximum information as quickly as possible through means of extreme surveillance, tapping into every single phone and security camera in Gotham for observation.

He uses the help of the inventor of arms, Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman), who threatens to quit his job as he believes such an act violates the citizens’ rights in Gotham City. Batman, however, argues that the system is necessary to stop the
Joker as quickly and efficiently as possible. Once the surveillance system is set up on every phone in the city, Batman stands back and admires the technology on screen and asks “Beautiful isn’t it?” to Lucius. Lucius responds with “Beautiful? Unethical? Dangerous?” He then continues to state that it is “too much power for one person”.

The film was released in 2008 and at the time it resonated highly with the National Security Agency (NSA) in America, authorizing illegal wiretapping on American citizens’ phones, which the NSA stated was all in aid of the war on terror. Edward Snowden, a previous employee of NSA was the whistle-blower responsible for releasing this information. Snowden was so opposed to this activity whilst he worked for the NSA that he left for Hong Kong in order to release files of this illegal surveillance and share with journalists for publishing. By challenging his own government, Snowden realised he would never be welcomed back in America by government officials, but he was prepared for this eventuality, believing it was a necessary thing to do.

Snowdon stated:

“The majority of people in developed countries spend at least some time interacting with the Internet, and Governments are abusing that necessity in secret to extend their powers beyond what is necessary and appropriate” (Snyder, 2013).

Unsurprisingly, in the wake of Edward Snowden’s revelations, George Orwell’s novel ‘1984’ gained a surge of popularity. The novel describes a society with prevailing surveillance and a totalitarian government. The widespread media coverage of Snowden then resulted in not only the American public, but the entire Western world expressing their opinions on the matter of surveillance.

Snowden’s revelations about our online privacy caused debate within the information and technology sphere. One main question asked was; how much do we actually care about our online privacy? Applications have emerged which pride themselves on consumer anonymity and privacy, such as Snapchat, but even they have been questioned on breaching their own privacy regulations. Sandy Pentland, an MIT professor and expert in the field of internet tracking and surveillance, speaks about something called ‘reality mining’. She states that reality mining “is about what you actually do; it’s not about how you imagine yourself. It uses the digital breadcrumbs left behind by cell phones and credit cards to quantify your life” (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2014). It has been demonstrated that users often like the feeling in control in their data, even if in reality they have very little. So with applications allowing the consumer to choose what information they share, the illusion is created that the consumer has more control than they actually do. This is known as the ‘control paradox’ (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2014). The control paradox can also be related to social media, where people appear happy to share their most personal moments (relationships, families, holidays etc.). We seem to share our most intimate moments because we believe we have sufficient privacy to ensure they are only shared between our ‘friends’ on Facebook or to our ‘followers’ on Twitter. We alter privacy settings so that we attain this false
sense of control over the data or pictures we are sharing.

We can clearly see how easy it is for government bodies and large corporations to access a wide range of information on its citizens, but conversely how easy is it for citizens to obtain information on them? We can reflect on the example of Snowden, revealing the illegal wiretapping of the American government, as an extreme example. However, as Snowden was employed by the NSA he cannot really be classed as a regular citizen. So the question remains; is it possible for citizens to obtain information on governments and corporations? “Remember, any state, any state, has a primary enemy: its own population” (Chomsky, Mitchell and Schoeffel 2002: 70). This quote from the book ‘Understanding Power’ (2002) is particularly relevant today, based on the wealth of access to technologies and information at our disposal. On one hand we have journalists reporting on matters where government officials may be breaching laws, for example the MP expenses scandal in Britain. On the other, there is state sensitive information that may never be revealed, despite possible illegalities in their methods. Obtaining such information may require another whistle blower such as Edward Snowden, who gave up everything he had; his home, his family and his job, to release sensitive information regarding the US government and other government bodies. The power of corporations also resonates as particularly prominent in The Dark Knight, with Bruce Wayne being the CEO in a major corporation. Wayne uses funds from this company to build the surveillance he believes is necessary to prevent terrorism within Gotham City. The significance of the surveillance system Bruce Wayne demands is that he ultimately is the person who destroys the system, reasoning that it is unethical, breaching the freedom rights of the citizens in Gotham City.

Overall it seems that parallels can be drawn very easily between the society we live in today and the society of Gotham City we see in The Dark Knight movies. It seems that if we, as civilians, are ever going to obtain state information about illegal goings on within our governments, we may be reliant on individuals who care enough and are passionate about the freedom of the people, such as Edward Snowden. The main problem is that not many would be willing to give up everything as Snowden did, in return for outing government bodies for carrying out perhaps unethical and immoral procedures. The cause of Snowden’s actions means that he is now not only banished from his home country of America, but not many countries in the world are prepared to grant him residential citizenship, leaving him in limbo. Today Snowden’s reputation varies from hero to traitor. Some believe that speaking out for America’s freedom and about the government’s abuse of power was a simply heroic act. Daniel Ellsberg of The Guardian states “Snowden did what he did because he recognised the NSA’s surveillance programs for what they are: dangerous, unconstitutional activity” (Ellsberg, 2013). Others believe what he did endangered lives and was a serious setback for the NSA developments and put America at serious risk.
A major reason for the Dark Knight’s critical and commercial success is its focus on social commentary. It asks key questions about surveillance and how big a role they play in our lives, and is consistent across all three films. It is an interesting contradiction to see Batman pride himself on being a moral and ethical superhero; however he is prepared to sacrifice the privacy of every person in Gotham City. Perhaps it is in this compromise of his morals that the Joker gains a small victory? Similarly in real life, it seems there will always be controversial methods used to gain access to information from government bodies in prevention of potential terrorist plots and attacks. With fear of terrorism at an all-time high worldwide, it seems like this fear may have been exploited and used as a scapegoat to rationalise illegal and unethical practises in accessing information by higher authorities. The matter is certainly not one which has, or should be, taken lightly by the global public. With reports of a biographical film being made on Ed Snowden’s life, it seems the opposite may be true and the topic of surveillance will an increasingly common discussion in the coming years.

**Bibliography:**


**Picture one:**


**Picture two:**


**Picture three:**