Surveillance and its Implications for Contemporary Society

Eve Morris

In the following work, I will attempt to critically analyse the growth of surveillance technology in contemporary society; assessing its different forms and the ramifications this has on actors and groups in society, as well as on contemporary society itself. I will be reflecting upon surveillance society in relation to the growth in Information and Communication Technologies, and changing intimacies, as well as linking this phenomenon to Post-Fordism theory.

To begin to understand the concept of surveillance, one must understand its meaning as the observation of individuals in society, as well as the collection of data in order to be used by others – for example advertising companies (Sample, 2017). Although the government may want us to believe that surveillance is purely a means to increase our security and safely, surveillance of individuals is also used for the organisation of power and to maintain control and supervise individuals or groups in society; in effect a form of policing (Ismail, 2017).

One can relate the issue of surveillance to globalisation, in regard to the changing social relationships that are forming due to the social expansion of the globe. Post-Fordism has seen a great rise in the advancements to technology (Rassool, 1993). The mass production of technological goods has meant that as a nation, we readily have access to the internet, and this has had many implications regarding surveillance.

In recent years, society has seen a huge rise in the number of individuals actively using dating websites and applications (Joinson, 2007) as well the use of social media as a form of communication. This use of technology as a means to form relationships is becoming a worldwide phenomenon and can be related unequivocally to the issue of changing intimacies – as people are now forming and maintaining romantic and platonic relationships with others purely through technology rather than through face to face contact, giving way to new contemporary definitions of love and friendship (Pananakhonsab, 2016).

However, it is important to be aware of the fact that these systems are indeed used for surveillance – in today's consumer culture (Lury, 2014), social media websites such as Instagram and Facebook, as well as dating applications such as Tinder all have associations with Third Party Websites, and sell the data containing our search histories and online profiles to companies in order for them to show us adverts that from analysing our online activity, have been selected in an attempt to convince individuals to consume specific products (Sample, 2017).

Social Media websites also allow employers and other companies to view our online profiles – meaning information about our life – including our location, for example if users check into somewhere on Facebook or have their Twitter location settings switched on, as well as our personal information,

social groups, and life history – this information is all readily available once we have posted it online.

Michel Aglietta's (2015) Regulation Theory is also applicable to the phenomenon of surveillance when considering how Fordism has regulated society in its entirety – production and consumption are governed and factors such as working hours and the welfare state have become systematic forces. Many customer-service based jobs in contemporary society are also standardised, and Ritzer's (2011) theory of predictability in McDonaldization illustrates this perfectly – for example in fast food restaurants such as 'Subway' and in many call centres, employers follow a script in order to give customers a standardised experience wherever they go. Employers are able to listen in to customer and staff interaction in order to ensure that they are following the set scripts correctly.

Contemporary examples of online surveillance are vast in numbers. Recently, the issue of net neutrality has risen to the public eye as the Federal Communications Commission abolished it in America (Kang, 2017), meaning that companies will now be able to charge people to allow them access to specific websites or social media outlets. This is a form of control and policing – as lower income families may not be able to afford particular internet packages, and subsequently may only be able to access right wing information or other propaganda on major corporate websites (Freedland, 2017).

Another rather ominous example of surveillance is the use of facial recognition data on smart phones. Applications such as Snapchat and the Animoji feature available on the iPhone X give users the ability to change images of their face into something seemingly fun and innocent, however our use of these could mean that these companies and the government own large databases full of images of our faces – and considering that technology companies are currently the most powerful in the world, it is harrowing to think that iPhones can even create photo albums of a single person based on its facial recognition abilities

(Lafrance, 2017). The multinational taxi service company 'Uber' has recently come under review for using its tracking data in order to identify customers that could potentially be working for the police or transport regulatory agencies, and used this information to ensure that their taxis did not arrive to avoid policing. The company even analysed the purchases of phones that were bought in areas surrounding the regulatory offices and examined customers' credit card details with the aim of identifying potential connections to the police (Orlowski, 2017).

For one to truly understand just how intricately our lives our monitored, one must take into account the various ways that we are being watched and policed every day. The concept of socialisation as 'getting children to learn and enact what are seen as desirable attitudes' was described by Stanley & Wise (1983: 66), and as children are taught further norms and values when entering academic institutions, one must take note of the hidden curriculum that is prominent in all schools that teaches children to uphold particular behaviours that will later be replicated in their social and professional careers (Margolis, 2002). This is a key example of how our behaviours are policed and controlled by wider society in order to shape individuals' behaviours.

The use of information technology as a means to collect and control data is such a hugely prominent issue that it must be discussed. It is interesting to note that although being under constant surveillance and scrutiny, and our translation from people into being simply data on a computer may seem as though it would lead to a lack of individualisation and freedom, there are in actuality a number of freedoms that we at citizens gain from being part of this process as a whole.

For example, having a social security number allows the government and other companies to view one's income, lifetimes earning and how many years you have been working for. This information is then used to assess whether an individual is an acceptable candidate to receive benefits payments such as Jobseeker's Allowance or loans for banks, and it is also used in order to keep track of the individual's tax payments or non-payments (Fontinelle, 2016). However, surveillance isn't done just though the use of technology, and the government uses other methods in order to gain information about the public. The Mark Stone case of 2010 is a prime example of how the police use unethical methods in order to infiltrate and manipulate particular groups in society without the participants' knowledge (Hattenstone, 2011).

Michel Foucault (1975) argues that the fact that we are so closely monitored in our everyday life has led to a new norm in which we have begun to monitor ourselves, by upholding society's norms and values and even in how we decide what we post online - we are very much aware that these actions will be scrutinised by the rest of society and we therefore are careful in what we choose to show (Giddens, 2015). Similarly, the introduction of CCTV cameras in the UK's streets has meant that citizens feel more obliged to act in a civil, law-abiding manner as one never knows when one is being watched. Bentham's Panopticon provides a basis with which to compare to modern day self-surveillance; it was a prison built specifically so that inmates were not able to see if there was a guard on duty, and therefore would behave well the whole time in order to avoid punishment (Foucault, 1975). This self-policing phenomenon has been recreated through the modern-day idea of constant public scrutiny.

From the information that I have gathered I can infer that through our online presence and use of new technology, every part of our social and private lives is increasingly becoming scrutinised and sold for profit. As a collective community, we have been socialised from an early age into monitoring our every move in order to uphold the standardised norms and values that are set in society, as well as paying close attention to the presence that we have online. Although the fact of our surveillance has benefits such as increased security and the ability to aid us when wanting to gain government help, it still remains a huge invasion of privacy, as our everyday lives and who we are as people are becoming nothing but data for companies to trade for financial gain, and a means by which the government use to control and police our behaviour.

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