

The People's Republic of Surveillancestan

By John Bruni

Contemplating this article, I was drawn to the idea of what actually constitutes 'the people'.

Is it correct to assume that 'the people' are those who elect officials in a democratic state? Or, are 'the people' the faceless mass of digital identities. Are 'the people' those who control the converging technologies and shamelessly exploit the ignorance and narcissistic tendencies of the less fortunate? If we speak of those who hold the power over us i.e., governments, corporations, sharks of all kinds and the media generally, one could say that 'the people' are those who have authority over us.



Increasingly, convergent centres of power, be they located in the US, the UK, Australia, Russia, China or anywhere else, are

becoming a single domain, a domain that promises to be every bit as dangerous and unstable as the oft-quoted republics of Central and South Asia, collectively and disparagingly referred to as 'the Stans' (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan etc.).

So, welcome to the People's Republic of Surveillancestan – a place where everyone has rights, though none of them are adhered to. A place where the location doesn't matter, where porn is free, as is the ability to shame yourself, as long as no one questions the lack of moral or ethical boundaries on their free domain space. Surveillancestan, a place where your shopping, banking and online habits are tracked and detected before being sucked up onto a national data-base, never to be erased. No matter how mundane your activity, you are a target. This is not some science fiction dystopia. This is planet Earth, today, in the early 21st Century. Postmodern, post-privacy and drifting towards a state of trans-humanism where the communications devices become so addictive in their features and applications, and so inconspicuous, that we will one day wear them in our clothing, if not under our skin. Communications are instant. Uploaded on satellites and beamed from one part of the world to the other. Our movements are monitored through CCTV cameras and through those great GPS apps, pinpointing our location to friends, partners and anyone else who cares to know.

Unfettered capitalism drove us to this point. Terrorism and transnational crime justified

it. Governments are now working hand in glove with the corporate giants who so ably manipulate our desires as to take from us the very thing we, at least in the West, once believed worth fighting and dying for – the survival of the inviolability of our private selves.



The latest controversy regarding personal privacy in the Internet Age has come and gone. It certainly made headlines, but is unlikely to reverse any of the obvious trends and enabling features of intrusive social media technologies. It was not a Wiki leaks-style scandal per se, though it was started by a whistleblower, a private contractor working for the US National Security Agency (NSA's), who ratted on the organisation's wide-ranging surveillance capabilities. Interestingly, the scandal was much more than this, something more visceral and closer to home. It was President Obama, the leader of the 'free world', a partisan Democrat in the US body politic, who staunchly defended his country's national security apparatus, sanctioning the eavesdropping on personal communications of American citizens, and by extension, the citizens of any other country (allied and non-

allied) of tangential interest to American external policy. It was a strange defence. Had anyone in a bygone era predicted that a future American president would willingly and overtly contravene the country's own constitutional protection of 'liberty', they would surely have been howled down as a paranoid conspiracy theorist crank.

But times have changed.

We live in a post-privacy world but unlike the dire dystopian predictions of George Orwell, the erosion of our liberty came to us like a thief in the night. It was sold to us on the pretext of 'convenience and safety'. Internet banking put our financial lives online and our credit/debit history on display for not just the banks to evaluate, but also government institutions, hackers and online criminals (of which there are plenty). Health records are in the process of being digitised and so, very soon, even insurance companies will likely deny or increase insurance premiums to people based on their 'risk'.



We are encouraged to live vicariously through our virtual online presence on a cacophony of social media platforms, with

many younger people (and some not so young) pushing the limits of social etiquette and decency – all such behaviour captured and stored forever on ‘the Cloud’.

But then again, as the old clichéd totalitarian defence goes, ‘if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear’.

And personal transparency is what it is all about – transparency to friend and foe, to the corporations trying to flog off their merchandise, to financial institutions and to the state. And if we think that national constitutions drawn up in the pre-Internet period of the 18th Century (such as the US Constitution) will protect us from state and corporate malfeasance, then think again. The collusion between international high finance, national governing elites and communications technology corporate giants is such that now the new social norm is accepting behaviour once considered unacceptable. Furthermore, the groundswell is on the side of those who think that, on balance, this techno-social revolution that we are currently going through is all for ‘the good’. If the national security/surveillance capabilities were thoroughly and completely focussed on the movements of suspected terrorists and organised criminals, then perhaps an argument in their favour could be sustained. But the fact that everyday interactions can and are being accessed gives food for thought. It insinuates that we, as individuals, are potential ‘enemies of the surveillance state’, the surveillance state that was ironically birthed by Western democracies, not Eastern autocracies.

So what does this mean for Mr and Mrs Citizen? It means that where once a person was considered innocent unless proven to be guilty of some wrong doing, the state can now consider you under suspicion at a whim, open your accounts and/or expose your virtual lives (foibles and all) for examination. Innocent unwitting interactions with a ‘guilty party’ may throw an unlucky soul into an unwelcomed interrogative mix (with or without that individual’s knowledge). The wide reach and international scope of the Internet means that no one is safe from such a scenario. But let’s not be too harsh. Long-held constitutional provisions on privacy will not be rescinded anytime soon, they simply will no longer have any meaning in the Internet Age. There are still a few champions of civil liberty, good men and women from all walks of life, but they are vastly outnumbered in their quest. With no apparent checks and balances on these extraordinary powers, whether in the US or elsewhere, the likelihood for the foreseeable future is that the champions of virtual reality will surrender the last remaining fragments of their ‘selves’ in order to look trendy in the facile quest of keeping up with the Jones’. As long as blind consumerism ignores the inconvenient truth that it is their pattern of consumption, their weakness for thin smart phones with higher and higher rates of connectivity and computing power that is behind their exposure to state and corporate surveillance, there will be no change. It is a supreme irony that it is us, now reduced to mere ‘ones’ and ‘zeros’ on a screen, who created the science fiction dystopia of today.

The truth is out. Behind the façade of modern democracy and freedom lurks the shadow of tyranny and autocracy.



As Baudelaire famously warned: *“The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he doesn’t exist.”*

– Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International –

Images Accessed: 12/06/2013

All seeing eye

<http://vitamindan.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/surveillance-orwell-business8aug05.jpeg>

NSA image

<http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/files/2013/06/nsa1.jpg>

Surveillance image

http://sydney.edu.au/images/content/news/2011/may/politics_surveillance.jpg

CCTV cameras

<http://www.ad-hocsecurity.com/cctvblog/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/surveillance-cameras.jpg>