Ellis, D., Harper, D. & Tucker, I. The psychology of surveillance: Experiencing the 'Surveillance Society'. *The Psychologist*. 29 (September), 682-685. ISSN: 0952-8229: https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-29/september/experiencing-surveillance-society

Experiencing the 'surveillance society'

The images that circulated following the November 2015 Paris attacks and the August 2011 UK disturbances have reminded us of the ubiquity of surveillance. In the UK we may be aware of the CCTV owned by local councils and shops; the helicopter-borne cameras of the police and news crews; and mobile phone cameras used by the public. Britain has become well-known internationally for its use of CCTV, and even conservative estimates suggest there are approximately 1.8 million CCTV cameras in the country (Gerrard & Thompson, 2011). In London, Freedom of Information Act requests have revealed that there are at least 25,000 cameras. However, CCTV and other cameras are not the only forms of surveillance. Since the revelations in 2013 by Edward Snowden (Greenwald, 2014) and the ensuing public debate, we are more aware of the capabilities both of intelligence agencies like the NSA and GCHQ and of companies like Apple, Google and Microsoft.

With the rise of information technologies in society, a new breed of surveillance has emerged. In addition to the embodied surveillance of CCTV cameras, we have the surveillance of information – what Roger Clarke (1988) has called 'dataveillance' – harvested through people's use of information technologies.

Increasingly, researchers have identified the development of two forms of 'dataveillance' (Clarke, 1998). The first relates to the ways in which personal information is gathered through information technologies by governments and commercial organisations, collected in large databases and then analysed and offered as a saleable commodity. The second relates to the ways in which people increasingly use social media as a way of sharing information about themselves, thereby allowing for peer-to-peer surveillance.

It is clear that we are living in an increasingly technologically sophisticated society, as electronic devices of various sorts have become inextricably embedded in our lives. Internet and mobile phone use has exploded since the 1990s, and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter have seen massive growth. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that researchers and media commentators have been arguing for some time that we are living in a 'surveillance society' (e.g. Ball et al., 2006; Lyon, 2007). What is a surprise, though, is that psychological research has not focused in detail on the variety of forms of digital surveillance. Consequently, we know relatively little about how ordinary people experience surveillance. Social psychologists Alex Haslam and Steve Reicher note that one of the offshoot findings of the Stanford Prison Experiment, that they partially replicated for a BBC documentary, was the importance of surveillance. They state that 'psychology needs to devote far more effort to developing a science of surveillance' (2002, p.13).

Where such research has been conducted, it has generally used survey-based methods to garner general attitudes towards surveillance (Dinev et al., 2008; Joinson et al., 2006), although there are some notable exceptions. For example, Levine (2000) argues that there is a lack psychological work in this area and puts forward the SIDE model (the social identity model of deindividuating effects: Reicher et al.,

1995) to facilitate insights into CCTV use and its effects. He states that 'the transformation of public space through constant visual surveillance' has 'psychological implications' (Levine, 2000, p.164). More recently, O'Donnell et al. (2010a, 2010b) have empirically investigated the role of identity in perceptions of surveillance, finding that surveillance is understood as more acceptable when it derives from a group or a leader with whom one shares an identity. The same group challenged the common conception that people work more productively when monitored . Although high surveillance led to higher productivity on a task, the actual quality of the work suffered (O'Donnell et al., 2013) (see box, p.684).

Theorising surveillance

In contrast to the relative silence within psychology, the interdisciplinary field of surveillance studies has grown apace over the last 20 years, drawing on sociology, media studies, computer science, security studies, criminology and the hacking community (Lyon, 2007). Early in the history of surveillance studies the dominant theoretical approach drew heavily on Foucault's (1979) conceptual examination of the 'panopticon', Jeremy Bentham's design for a building enabling maximum surveillance (a design apparently influencing the designs of many public buildings, especially prisons). Here, surveillance of the person was intimately connected with issues of power. Some combined this notion with popular notions of totalitarian state surveillance following George Orwell's 1984 (which itself owed a lot to Yevgeny Zamyatin's We, published in 1921 and which Orwell had reviewed for Tribune in 1946).

This approach led some to focus on surveillance as inherently repressive, although Foucault's point was actually more subtle – the panopticon was designed so that residents never knew when they were being observed, and so had to regulate themselves. However, over time, as more and more people have willingly given information about themselves online and to companies like Google, it is clear that not only is a wider range of actors involved, but also our relationship with surveillance technologies is a nuanced one. Following the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Haggerty and Ericson (2000) have conceptualised surveillance as an 'assemblage' – in other words, a complex web of heterogeneous but interconnected elements, including people, technologies, institutions, and so on (see also Harper et al., 2014). Surveillance is not seen as a stable entity but rather as multiple, relational and shifting over time.

However, although people are part of this assemblage, much of the surveillance studies literature focuses on the technology of surveillance and on the surveillers rather than the surveilled. One of the ways that psychologists can contribute to this area is a concern with how ordinary people experience surveillance. How do they orient to, construct and respond to visual surveillance and the widespread collection of personal information? How has the technological revolution – and its embedded surveillance capabilities – affected the way we view ourselves and the society in which we live? The August 2011 disturbances, for example, showed that many of those captured in images were 'surveillance-aware' and had their faces covered or obscured in some way.

Dataveillance

On social networking sites such as Facebook, people disclose all kinds of personal data – photos of themselves, friends and family, updates on their location, information about their behaviour and activity. All this data is potentially visible to others; whilst people may be aware of privacy issues in terms of what other Facebook users can see of their data, they are often not so aware of how Facebook itself collects and stores information about its users, with the aim of using it to attract advertising. An online search engine like Google operates on a model of collecting the searches of people and collating them into mass databases, which it can use to attract advertisers. This model's success means Google is now worth over $500 billion – as internet security commentator Bruce Schneier puts it, 'surveillance is the business model of the internet' (2015, p.49). An exchange takes place: people are able to use dataveillance technologies, but they have to disclose personal information (which can be recorded, stored and used).

This exchange presents new challenges to notions of privacy and identity. Our thoughts, feelings and desires – as represented in our search histories – are now recorded in the databases of huge technology companies. People risk becoming commodified, through their personal information. In social psychological terms, we could say that with the incessant rise in the prominence of information technologies in everyday life, people are increasingly defined by information as well as biology.

It is also notable that much of this dataveillance takes place in 'private' spaces (e.g. the home). The spread of surveillance across public and private space presents the potential for people's sense of self and identity to be shaped by surveillance. People can also engage in 'participatory surveillance' (Albrechtslund, 2008) through watching each other (e.g. via social media). Moreover, media technologies are facilitating 'bottom-up' surveillance, which Mathiesen (1997) terms 'synopticism'. Here the powerful too are subject to surveillance (as with the inadvertent recording of then Prime Minister Gordon Brown in the 2010 UK general election 'Bigotgate' episode). Surveillance is no longer conducted solely in an Orwellian manner, where the citizens of the state fall under the powerful gaze of the ruling elites. Rather it is becoming more complex and fluid, operating at many levels, subject to control and initiation by many different actors, from large organisations and government departments to people tracking themselves and others through social media.

Towards a psychology of surveillance

Psychological research has recently come to focus on people's knowledge and experience of surveillance. Some distinct themes have emerged that capture some of the complexity and variability of our understanding and engagement with surveillance technologies.

Three dominant constructions appear to be culturally available in public discourse about surveillance (Harper, 2011): a narrative of suspicion (that we are all now paranoid because of the rise in CCTV); a narrative of indifference, or more pejoratively, complacency (e.g. that we are 'sleepwalking into a surveillance society'); and, finally, a narrative involving the balancing or trading of competing imperatives (privacy, security, convenience, etc.). Our analysis of interviews with 31 people from London and the South East suggested that the suspicious and indifferent constructions were deployed throughout the interviews but the 'balancing'

construction less so, at least explicitly. However, what was interesting was that different formulations were drawn upon at different times, partly because of the different contexts of surveillance and partly because of the interactional context of the interviews themselves. It is this fluidity that quantitative surveys miss because they are oriented to identifying an 'average' attitude across situations. The quite complex and ambivalent responses to surveillance we reported could not be easily categorised as pro- or anti-surveillance. Rather, people appeared to construct their options for action as limited, given the ubiquity of data-gathering when using the internet. Perhaps this partly explains why, apart from the debate over ID cards, there has been little political traction in the UK for a rolling back of surveillance.

A relationship between surveillance and emotion has been identified as core to everyday experiences of surveillance (Ellis et al., 2013). The continued expansion of the surveillance society leads to the development of new social norms where the expectation that one is being surveilled becomes normalised. Surveillance is ever-present and yet absent (unnoticed), material (embodied through the CCTV camera) and yet ethereal (the CCTV operator is not visible), geographical (located in a particular time and space) yet trans-geographical (transmitted to other times and spaces). Thus the thoughts and feelings that emerge as a consequence of living in a highly surveilled society can be equally complex and ambiguous; for example, simultaneously producing multiple forms of spatialised affects – what Anderson (2009) has called 'affective atmospheres' – such as affects related to security (notions of safety) and insecurity (invasions of privacy).

These findings relate to cultural geographical research in which experiences of surveillance are framed as laden with ambiguity and ambivalence, often appearing vague, imprecise and incoherent. These experiences are difficult for individuals to interpret and articulate (Koskela, 2000). Because of its overbearing normalisation, complexity and clandestine character, individuals see surveillance as a complex, normalised backdrop to everyday life. They may see it as having minimal effect on them: 'I have done nothing wrong, nothing can be done about it, so why bother about it?' (Ellis et al., 2013).

However, for some people there is a sense of compulsion over surveillance through digital technologies. They may report feeling a pressure to use online technologies in order to avoid feeling 'left out' of society, and potentially being positioned as old-fashioned (Tucker et al., 2012). One conclusion we reached was that, despite proactively engaging with a range of information technologies, many people did not comprehend the extent of surveillance made possible by these technologies. This is even more the case given the rapid pace of technological change so that people need to regularly update their knowledge (e.g. of new technological capabilities). As a result, there is a need to study how these changes reshape people's everyday psychological experiences (Tucker, 2013).

Discussion

Recent psychological research has laid some of the groundwork for understanding the complex and multiple relationships people have with surveillance technologies, but so many questions remain. A number of the studies cited in this article focused on London, a highly surveilled city. It would be worth looking at other UK urban and rural areas. Cross-cultural studies, particularly with cities in developing countries,

would inform us about the psychological effects of the technologisation of developed countries.

Perhaps most importantly, we need to investigate whether responses to visual surveillance (e.g. CCTV) correlate with responses towards forms of dataveillance. The CCTV camera has become an iconic signifier of the gaze of 'others', but how will people respond to surveillance activity that is increasingly organised and enacted by complex software algorithms? How might social media enable new modes of subjectivity in relation to performing oneself online? Surveillance, in its many different configurations (see boxes) is increasing throughout modern society; psychological researchers need to engage in more interdisciplinary work to address its influence on the shaping of individual and social life.

Box: Surveillance in the workplace

Surveillance in the workplace has risen significantly in recent times, catalysed by an increase in the role of electronic media (email, social media). Psychological research has featured as part of a range of studies into the impact of surveillance in occupational settings (see Ball, 2010, for a useful summary).

Research undertaken prior to large-scale use of the new forms of digital media has focused on issues such as task design and supervisory style, finding for example that workplace monitoring that was regular and intermittent was reported as less stressful than constant surveillance (Larson & Callahan, 1990). Also, being monitored as part of a group, rather than individually, is seen as less stressful (Brewer & Ridgeway, 1998). This has led to guidance stating that workplace surveillance practices need to be supplemented by feedback and coaching, so that employees understand what monitoring processes exist and how to respond to them (Amick & Smith, 1992).

Recent psychological studies have addressed issues of compliance with, and resistance to, workplace monitoring and surveillance technologies, such as computer activity including email, websites visited, keystrokes, and even screen shot capture (Spitzmuller & Stanton, 2006). Research has focused on behavioural intention, which has been found to be shaped by organisational factors (commitment and identification) as well as attitudes (Spitzmuller & Stanton, 2006). Such work has relied primarily on attitude and survey data.

The importance of addressing the psychological impact of workplace surveillance was shown recently by the European Court of Human Rights January 2016 ruling in the Bărbulescu v. Romania case that personal use of the internet at the workplace is not necessarily protected under Article 8 (the right to respect for private and family life) of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Box: Youth drinking cultures and social media

Making oneself visible to peers through social media brings many benefits for young adults in constructing their identities, but it also means exposing oneself to the commodifying practices of commercial organisations. Lyons et al. (2015) reported that young adults in New Zealand focus primarily on the ongoing social relations revolving round drinking practices, rather than the possibilities for commercial

surveillance that their behaviour enables. Indeed the visibility that social media affords is key to the existence of networks of drinking culture, as the posting of photos and comments in between events maintains social relations. Moreover, 're-living' drunk nights through posting photos or videos online is seen as a positive beneficial practice in its own right.

However, the researchers also found that an awareness of the potential for surveillance in young people can emerge in relation to drinking cultures, with females, in particular, wary of being photographed in drunk states or with alcoholic drinks, for fear of such photos being posted on social media (primarily Facebook). As Tonks (2012) discovered, 'these photos are no longer confined only to friends' Facebook pages' as commercial photographers like Snapstar Live www.facebook.com/SnapStarLive and https://vimeo.com/snapstarlive 'photograph people out clubbing at different bars' and upload the photos onto an external website where 'Facebook users can tag themselves to connect the photos to their own profile' (p.91).

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