Do we now live in a 'surveillance' society

The concept of surveillance has been defined by postmodernists as being a form of social control whereby individuals are monitored through various agencies e. g. the police, the government, etc. This notion also includes self-policing, which is developed through social norms directing individuals' cognition and behaviour. Foucault believed discourses endeavour to create order from society chaos, control and direct behaviour towards particular norms in post-modern societies. This differs from pre-industrial societies where force is/was the dominant social control method (Lawson ; Garrod 2000: 284).

A. Giddens (1990: 162) claimed surveillance is one of four components of high modernity. Surveillance runs throughout society in workplaces, schools, government, healthcare, consumerism, generally at two extremes. MI5 scrutinising terrorist suspects and supermarkets tracing purchases. It is an important aspect within society and is increasingly being discussed within sociology due to the increasing effects it's having. In response to the question, it must be made clear that that it is British society this paper focuses upon; different societies would require different interpretations.

Firstly social theorists in this area will be discussed, followed by evidence portraying Britain as a surveillance society e. g. criminal, workplace, September 11th. , and finally my answer to the question. M. Foucault (1991) in Macionis & Plummer (1997: 227) identified the relationship between power, knowledge and surveillance. He believed modern developments in comparison to the past are evidence of power and surveillance extensions e. g. the emerging modern prison, psychiatric discourses defining madness, etc.

The power and surveillance ideology is fused through discourses (bodies of ideas and knowledge), shaping societal beliefs about correct social norms e. g. what is defined as criminal; socially controlling public behaviour. He contrasted old, cruel punishment methods e. g. public execution; to contemporary surveillance/imprisonment systems e. g. task timetables, observing that these modern forms are intensely rule-governed. Consequently, different control structures can be seen historically here.

Foucault examined Bentham's Panopticon prison design and argued its features, (central tower, continuous observation, few supervisory resources and self-discipline due to not knowing when they were being watched), are integrated into modern prison systems. This self-discipline is now an essential feature in modern societies, the threat of being caught changes individual's thoughts into regulating their personal actions. Foucault believed punishment is more effective in targeting and manipulating the psyche rather than the body; therefore docile bodies are created which are self-disciplined, causing no social order danger.

However, there are individual differences, exceptions to the majority e. g. truant pupils, employee sabotage, etc. Thus, although discipline and surveillance are never completed projects there is always some error (Haralambos & Holborn 2000: 638). Foucault's ideas have been both influential and criticised. It can be argued that surveillance is distinguishable between formal and informal; the former being structured with complex methods in usually advanced societies e. g. North America, Japan, Western Europe, etc.

Incorporating systems such as personal data collection for marketing purposes, closed circuit television (CCTV) and workplace surveillance. Whilst the latter surveillance methods are heavily relied upon by pre-industrial societies without the technology, expertise or structures to employ formal methods. The primary groups (family, community groups) shape the informal surveillance system e. g. some countries use religious beliefs to enforce power and monitor people. However, as Macionis ; Plummer (1997: 226) show, advanced societies still incorporate informal methods e. g. increasingly popular neighbourhood watch schemes.

This demonstrates that in advanced societies especially, formally structured methods of surveillance may not be sufficient enough and informal methods may be required additionally. Lyon (1997) distinguished four locations of electronic surveillance: government administration, policing/security systems, the workplace and consumption world, showing the incidence of surveillance in different environments. Record-linking and data-matching is the most significant characteristic of surveillance in these different spheres. Personal records collected for one intention are used for another (www. socresonline. rg. uk). E. g. employee records are used by the benefits agency regarding welfare payments. Lyon (1997) identified a convergence between governmental (e. g. taxation) and commercial (e. g. consumer data) surveillance; boundaries over which data can flow are blurred.

The privatisation of data is increasingly apparent which is traded for profit like goods, with seemingly little public protection other than the Data Protection Act. This convergence of surveillance systems certainly benefits governments and corporations, although not individuals who data belongs

to. However, steps to control e. g. smart' cards are methods of retrieving citizen data control.

The internet perpetuates this convergence, data sharing and consumer surveillance in general e. g. amazon. co. uk memorises which books users have reviewed to target them in future with similar titles. Supermarkets in the retailing sector are main utilisers of surveillance, providing power and control over systems; management employ surveillance methods to control the workforce and production/service processes. EPOS (electronic point of sale) can monitor both employee checkout speed and products customers are purchasing at any given time.

The objective of the former system is to ensure employees are working at an appropriate specified pace and thus identify training, motivation problems, etc. Whilst the secondary aim is allowing centralised management to examine product sales and to complete hourly ' stock-takes' for reordering. EPOS is a result of technological advancement and whilst supermarkets' workforce and consumer scrutiny objectives occurred prior to this system innovation, EPOS certainly allows easier, quicker and up to date surveillance.

Database marketing (dataveillence) allows consumer surveillance e. . the nectar card; a recent development allowing companies under the scheme to target customers efficiently by collecting, storing, retrieving and comparing their details. This reduces wasted marketing costs whilst at the same time maximising potential profitable customers. Personal data circulation is a vital element of knowledge-based economies (www. qsilver. queensu. ca. html). However, as Lyon (1997) identifies, this is portrayed as a one-way system

coaxed by powerful marketers using demographic and dataveillance apparatus.

But in my experience, consumers complete forms at will, thus providing their data willingly. A further example of surveillance in industry is in call centres. Many believe this type of work is merely a modern version of the old mill ' sweatshops'. Employees are monitored rigidly not by direct human supervisor surveillance, but by computer surveillance recording time spent away from the screen (which is enforced to be minimal), even toilet breaks are monitored.

A central computer operated by a senior employee observing many other computers enforces this surveillance technology; reducing the need for direct human supervision. Call centres have team leaders who are not supervisors but facilitators. However, to say that this surveillance is new in industry would be naive. Taylorism – a method of job production that existed during the 19th century whose principles survive today, shows how a highly controlled/monitored work organisation method is not a new concept.

Taylor had direct control over his workforce, believing this was the best method to gain high employee productivity. Management like power and control; surveillance is a mechanism in achieving this. As computers grow more powerful and networks more extensive, these processes are extending the world of knowledge-based work, creating new organizational forms whereby managers do not manage and supervisors do not supervise; rather, they have become computers operators that supervise and manage, through pre-programmed algorithms and models (Huczynski ; Buchanan 2001: 426).

Criminal surveillance as a form of social control involves the police, prisons, psychiatrists, etc. However, pre-modern eras of criminal surveillance were local bound and informal, but with industrialisation and modern control processes, these were subjected to bureaucratisation and government control/investment. But recently there has been consensus to shift away from state expenditure on prisons to privatisation (Macionis ; Plummer 1997: 228). Therefore removing government's total control of surveillance, however they still have a significant influence e. . in criminal/prison legislation.

Many writers believe that Britain is now a police state; the police as agents of social control for the government known as ' Big Brother' are now using surveillance technology e. g. CCTV in catching criminals (Abercrombie & Warde 2000). Technological growth has changed our society's policing structure as computerised information systems hold data on previous and present criminals in behaviour monitoring. This increases police power over maintaining social order.

Moreover, the introduction of electronic surveillance e. . CCTV in city/town centres, motorways, etc, aimed to reduce police personnel quantity required on the streets, whilst also increasing direct public surveillance to 24hrs, over a broad geography and projecting a deterrent notion – if individuals commit crime there will be video evidence to convict. However, the public sees CCTV as desirable as a deterrent in keeping streets safe. Although arguably this crime is merely shifted to non-surveillance areas.

Recent terrorist attacks in America (11/09/01) led to worldwide surveillance tightening regimes e. g. tricter airport controls and new government legislation against terrorism threats. Many have been critical that this inhibits public civil rights for citizens due to increased screening. But others claim heightened surveillance was required; September 11th serving as an awakening. Some groups/individuals are risk-assessed and ranked in terms of their social dangerousness e. g. since September 11th this has occurred in terms of race – particularly Arabs (www. socresonline. org. uk). In some countries ' Arab' and ' Muslim' minorities are extremely targeted by these methods.

Other higher risk categories e. g. sex offenders are tracked and monitored, also the new American legislation requiring airline companies to inform the government details about every person entering in and out of the country. Risk management increasingly motivates the surveillance activities above, aiming to anticipate/predict individual's activities/trends, by planning for, preventing, or pre-empting behaviours (www. qsilver. queensu. ca. html). Overall, the examples show the surveillance gaze runs throughout modern British society and is literally inescapable.

Key concepts of control, power, discipline and prediction create near perfect knowledge; central to contemporary surveillance. Surveillance is crucial to social ordering of individual and collective behaviour, which is based upon self and external source monitoring; both visible and invisible to the subject. However, this is not to say surveillance did not previously exist, I believe we do live in a surveillance society contemporarily but actually surveillance has

been present throughout the 20th century; perhaps we are just more aware of it now.

Whether we now live in a surveillance society depends on which time periods are compared, i. e. comparing now with prior September 11th 2001 or much earlier e. g. pre-industrialisation. Since September 11th surveillance has intensified across the globe, but did exist the month before, showing how we can only anticipate surveillance to a certain point; it is not comprehensible. Pre-industrialisation, surveillance was concentrated in prisons and hospitals but now is more widespread, in education even teachers not just pupils are observed.

Since the escalation of industrial society and larger organisations, stricter and more formal methods of observing behaviour and collecting personal data have been concentrated upon. It seems that surveillance is now not done by humans on humans as such, but indirectly by computer technology allowing new electronic surveillances whereby humans are the driving force behind it, e. g. a CCTV operator in a centralised location. Foucault shows how surveillance systems have differed historically, so surveillance was present but with different methods e. g. in work.

Macionis & Plummer (1997: 226) quote ' Whoever says modernity says surveillance', highlighting the surveillance and modernity link, but according to this quote pre-modernity society(s) were not characterised by surveillance. Lyon (1997) agrees; today's surveillance forms are a product of modernity. The increase in television fly-on-the-wall shows e. g. Big Brother, highlights surveillance extremes subjecting participants to wide public

scrutiny. This highlights that we as viewers/consumers like monitoring other's behaviour. Surveillance societies are viewed positively and negatively.

In the future, surveillance may become even more stringent and technical e. g. the imminent ID cards in Britain and increasing computer-modelling advancement. Also, Macionis & Plummer (1997: 226) identify, the possibility of body electronic identification; unique identifiers e. g. eye irises/voices are scanned, thus externalities to the body e. g. passports will not be required. But human rights campaigners would severely despise of this, for privacy issues. Macionis & Plummer (1997: 226) claim ' many more deviants are being created through this system', whereby boundaries of control are becoming vague.

Other negatives are, cameras relocating crime to non-monitored, private and seedy areas e. g. with prostitution, social divisions are reinforced by classifying certain groups that are processed for eligibility and access into the country; thuds surveillance allows ' social ordering'. However, it is not a one-way system as Foucault claims, ' we are bearers of our own surveillance'. The anxious public seem willing to endure countless intrusions, delays, and questions than prior September 11th (www. qsilver. queensu. ca. html); data-subjects interact with surveillance systems, but in reality have little choice not to.