British authorities use new technology to increase state surveillance

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British authorities have stepped up their use of Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) technology for state surveillance through the introduction of a Computerised Face Recognition (CFR) system in the London borough of Newham.

CFR works by converting the human face into a sequence of numbers. A neurometric system can match the images from surveillance cameras with facial images held in computer databases. The system utilises a number of relatively new powerful computing technologies that can scan a crowd at a rate of twenty faces a second, digitise the faces (converting them into code that can be electronically stored) and match the images with varying degrees of accuracy against identities in a database.

The system cannot easily be fooled by a change of facial hair or hairstyle. It is capable of looking beyond these superficial changes because it registers the essential light and shade created by the facial structure. The facial templates created by the system are called eigenfaces.

No less than 144 stationary and 11 mobile cameras will scan the faces of pedestrians in Newham and attempt to match them with those of convicted criminals present on a Metropolitan police database. When a *'correspondence'* occurs the person's image and coded number will appear on the controller's screen. The control room officer can then contact the local police who are able to log onto the system and view the image and take any action they wish.

The Newham project is intended as a nationwide pilot scheme, with the imminent addition of another 90 cameras at local housing estates to add to those in shopping centres and transport interchanges. Other local authorities will adopt the system if it is deemed to be successful.

The system operates on a recognition threshold of 70-75 percent, but this can be lowered according to weather conditions. This means that the chance for a mistaken identity is large, aside from the infringement of civil liberties and personal privacy that the use of this technology implies.

When questioned by the *Guardian* newspaper regarding the system's abuse of civil liberties, Newham's environment director Malcolm Smith retorted with the vernacular of New Labour's 'Law and Order' campaign. 'We are interested in the civil liberties of those people who want to go about their business lawfully in Newham without being bothered by anybody.'

The danger is obvious that such technology can be used by authorities to prevent political dissent and punish those deemed 'dangerous' to the state. Through this ubiquitous eye, governments can both impose discipline and simultaneously render the public acquiescent.

In the city described in Zamiatin's *We*, everyone is housed but the walls are made of glass. In the city of Orwell's *1984*, everyone possesses a television set that they cannot turn off. No one knew at which moment the set is being used by 'Big Brother' to monitor the viewer. Most recently Peter Weir's film, *The Truman Show*, depicted the ultimate controlled environment where the lead character is the subject of a 24-hour soap opera by virtue of ever-present cameras. Scary yes, but the director is only extrapolating from current developments.

Surveillance equipment has become almost universal throughout Britain. CCTV cameras watch our every movement, perched above doorways, from rooftops, inside vending machines. Their proliferation increases from one day to the next at motorway intersections, on

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police car roofs and increasingly in residential neighbourhoods.

Anyone who raises concerns regarding the intrusiveness of this technology is met with the mantra 'Nothing to hide, nothing to fear'. These are the empty slogans of those who seek to establish a system of national identity cards, who wish to have access to your e-mail and bug your telephones.

By the end of the millennium an estimated half a million camera systems could be in operation in Britain. CRF is alleged to be capable of scanning a database of 50 million faces in less than a minute. Images from any CCTV camera can be linked into the system, just as long as those images are processed and transmitted in digital form. A new driving licence containing the holder's photograph will almost certainly be digital, providing the state with a readymade database containing the digitised face prints of the bulk of the adult population, creating a national grid of cameras with a national database of faces. Nothing to hide, nothing to fear?

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