

Britain is video surveillance capital of the world

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It is estimated that there are some 4.2 million Closed Circuit TV (CCTV) cameras in Britain, one for every 14 people. An individual might be captured by more than 300 separate cameras on an average day.

Such all-pervasive video surveillance, combined with the ability to exploit the information contained in numerous government and private databases, enables the almost seamless monitoring of the population.

The list of places monitored by CCTV is endless. Most of Britain's urban centres are under surveillance, as are motorways, hospitals, schools, banks, museums, shopping malls, sports facilities and travel hubs such as railway stations and airports.

CCTV cameras are operated by the police, the security services, various national and local government agencies and a myriad of institutions and private companies.

Their insidious spread has seriously eroded long-standing democratic rights. The routine recording of video footage in both public and private spaces represents a massive intrusion into individual privacy.

CCTV is increasingly being used to monitor so-called antisocial behaviour, including minor offences such as littering, urinating in a public place and drunkenness.

All demonstrations are now routinely recorded by specialist police video units on the ground, and from helicopters. Even if no crime or public order offence has been committed, the footage is kept by the police, providing evidence of an individual's political stance on issues such as the war in Iraq, nuclear energy, pensioners' rights, hunting, etc.

In the 1990s, the Home Office spent 78 percent of its crime prevention budget on installing CCTV systems, and £500 million has been spent on CCTV infrastructure over the last decade. However, there is no conclusive evidence that crime has been significantly reduced—the main justification for its introduction. One Home Office study found that CCTV schemes “had little overall effect on crime levels.” Academic research has pointed to the “displacement effect”—a reduction in crime in an area monitored by CCTV is accompanied by a rise in crime in neighbouring unmonitored areas.

Richard Thomas, Britain's Information Commissioner—nominally charged with enforcing and

overseeing the Data Protection Act 1998 and the Freedom of Information Act 2000—recently published a 140-page “Report on the Surveillance Society.”

The document, prepared by the Surveillance Studies Network, an academic group, warns that “people's lives will be monitored even more in the next decade by the government, the public sector, employers and big business.”

Advances in computer technology have also been applied to video surveillance. The digitisation of CCTV means that a new generation of “smart cameras,” or cameras linked to sophisticated computer systems, can now be used to recognise an individual person through “face recognition” software, or to read a vehicle's number plate.

The deployment of this last application makes Britain the first country in the world to record the movements of all vehicles. In 1996, Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) recorded just over 300,000 instances of vehicles exceeding speed limits. By 2004, the system was used more than 2 million times.

Thousands of existing CCTV cameras are now being converted to read number plates automatically night and day, providing 24-hour coverage of all motorways and main roads, as well as towns, cities, ports and garage forecourts.

This network of cameras automatically reads every passing number plate, storing the data for several years. No longer used merely to enforce speed restrictions, a central ANPR database has been set up alongside the Police National Computer in Hendon, north London. This can record details of up to 35 million number-plate “reads” per day, including time, date and precise location. This huge database of vehicle movements enables the police or security services to analyse any journey a driver has made.

There are plans to extend the database, increasing the storage period to five years and linking it to thousands of additional cameras. In this way, details of up to 100 million number plates could be fed into the central database each day.

Not only is Britain the world leader in spying on its citizens, the National DNA Database, projected to have 3.7 million profiles by April 2007, is the world's biggest DNA database.

Some 2 million people are arrested each year in England and Wales. Since the Criminal Justice Act 2003 became law, the police are empowered to record not only the fingerprints of all

those arrested, but also to take and keep their DNA samples, regardless of eventual guilt or innocence. Once again, this data is accessible via the Police National Computer.

The National DNA Database was set up in 1995. By 2005, it contained some 3.45 million individual records, or roughly 5.2 percent of the population. If a comparable system existed in America with a similar level of recording, it would contain the DNA of some 15 million individuals.

Professor Alec Jeffreys from the University of Leicester, who pioneered “DNA fingerprinting” in the 1980s, recently told the *BBC* that the National DNA Database now contained samples from hundreds of thousands of innocent people, and was “skewed socio-economically and ethnically.”

“My view is that it is discriminatory,” Jeffreys stated.

The records contained in the database display a marked racial bias against those from ethnic minorities, with nearly 40 percent of black males and 13 percent of Asian males now being profiled.

The National DNA Database contains information on some 135,000 black males aged 15-34, estimated to be more than three quarters of Britain’s young black population. By contrast, only just over one fifth of young white males’ DNA are recorded on file.

Prompted by widespread concerns at the potential for misuse of such information, the Nuffield Council on Bioethics is presently conducting a study entitled “Forensic use of bioinformation—ethical issues.”

DNA identification is not infallible: As the “Report on the Surveillance Society” notes, “whilst a negative DNA test seems to be a near perfect tool for acquitting the innocent, false negatives being very rare, false positives are surprisingly likely.”

Misidentification is a commonplace in other surveillance systems. Recently, the Criminal Records Bureau, routinely called upon to provide information about those seeking to work with children or vulnerable adults, revealed that 2,700 people had been wrongly identified as having criminal records, possibly costing them their jobs.

Moreover, the Police Inspectorate has noted that 22 percent of records entered into the Police National Computer at force level contained at least one error, even when they had been checked by a supervisor.

The Labour government is pressing ahead with its plans to introduce ID cards, linked to a National Identify Database that can identify every citizen with a unique reference number across multiple data sources—public and private.

The term “dataveillance” has been coined to describe the surveillance of a person’s activities through electronic data. Cross-referenced by an ID number, linked to a massive CCTV network employing face-recognition software and automatic vehicle registration, and by accessing numerous government and private databases, the British state is developing the means to monitor the movement and whereabouts of any individual at

any time, virtually at the press of a button.

Prime Minister Tony Blair has defended this Orwellian state of affairs. Writing in the *Telegraph* at the beginning of November, he insisted, “We need ID cards to secure our borders and ease modern life.”

He continued, “I know this will outrage some people but, in a world in which we daily provide information to a whole host of companies and organisations and willingly carry a variety of cards to identify us, I don’t think the civil liberties argument [against ID cards] carries much weight.”

Such disregard for long-standing legal principles, such as the right to privacy and the presumption of innocence, is no surprise coming from a prime minister whose government has enacted a plethora of anti-democratic legislation under the guise of the “fight against terror.”

The arguments employed by Blair have been regurgitated by *Guardian* columnist Polly Toynbee, who derided those who oppose such massive state surveillance for indulging in middle class hysteria. Disingenuously claiming that there is really nothing to worry about in the “surveillance society,” Toynbee described opposition to the destruction of civil liberties as “paranoid speculation about imaginary abuses.”

Denouncing those for whom she claimed “liberty is taking priority over equality,” she insinuated that those opposing the erosion of democratic rights were seeking to divert from more pressing issues.

“Why aren’t people as angry about the galloping inequality in living standards?” she asked.

Toynbee is a long-standing defender of the Blair government, whose big business policies are directly responsible for the increase in social inequality.

Her argument not only gives carte blanche to the government for its attack on civil liberties. It also seeks to conceal the fact that this offensive is intimately bound up with “galloping inequality.”

Under conditions in which the mass of the population live in economic insecurity, and in which all the last vestiges of welfare reforms are being dismantled, the British state is resorting to the most repressive measures to deal with the resulting class tensions.



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