

Surveillance in Literature and Its Relevance to Current Society

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Abstract: We have come a long way from the days of human spies to strange gadgets of James Bond or Mission Impossible to the microchips and drones to the government funded agencies like National Security agency that have access to all the telephone and Internet records through the Telecom companies. Surveillance can be viewed as a violation of privacy, while authoritarian governments seldom have any domestic restrictions as against the so called liberal democracy. Over the past 20 years surveillance has become an increasingly important topic within both academic and public debate. A society where privacy and human dignity is eroded or abolished completely or the social divisions and exclusions that are fostered warning us about the current trend of our age.

Keywords: private, public, 'surveillance society, intelligence gathering, authoritarian governments, risk society

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I. INTRODUCTION

I remember an article I recently read which rightly pointed out that the line between private and public is now-a-days as porous as tissue paper. Like the cat, while drinking milk closes its eyes and believes nobody is watching it, we too assume that no one sees or hears our private life; we may be right until we come to know that someone was watching or listening. The general feeling at such times is usually awful all must agree. The Wikileaks is testimony to this fact. So today we know that in the name of security we have lost our secured privacy.

We have come a long way from the days of human spies to strange gadgets of James Bond or Mission Impossible to the microchips and drones to the government funded agencies like National Security agency that have access to all the telephone and Internet records through the Telecom companies. So we can safely say that privacy is an illusion today, thanks to our ever evolving technology. In plain words, we live in a 'surveillance society'.

So what exactly is surveillance?

Definition 1: Merriam Webster dictionary: a close watch kept over someone or something (as by a detective), also: supervision.

Definition 2: the careful watching of somebody who may have done something wrong. The monitoring of behaviour, activities or information for the purpose of influencing, managing or directing.

Definition 3: surveillance is the monitoring of behaviour, activities or information for the purpose of influencing, managing or directing. This includes observation from a distance by means of electronic equipments or interception of electronically transmitted information also called as Internet traffic. It also includes simple technical methods like human intelligence gathering and postal interception.

Surveillance can be viewed as a violation of privacy, while authoritarian governments seldom have any domestic restrictions as against the so called liberal democracy, yet international espionage is common among all types of countries.

The supporters of surveillance argue that this can reduce crimes by three means- deterrence, observation and reconstruction. Surveillance can help reconstruct an incident and prove the guilt through the available footage or data.

The book 'Discipline and Punish' by the critical theorist Michael Foucault is generally taken as being one of the paradigmatic work on theories of surveillance and discipline. Foucault believes that in addition to its obvious function of identifying and capturing individuals who are committing undesirable acts, surveillance also creates a feeling of being always watched, hence leading to self-policing. The state can control the populace without resorting to physical force which is often problematic and also expensive.

The work of Foucault (1977) catalysed considerable controversy over the role of the 'panoptic on prison' plan within modernity. The most stimulating surveillance scholarship to emerge has not been that which

focuses on single events or that which declares that we now live in a digital panoptic or electronic cage, but rather that which puts surveillance in a historical and comparative critical frame.

The people who oppose have expressed concern that by allowing continuous increase in government surveillance of citizens, we will end up in a mass surveillance society with extremely limited or non-existent politics or personal freedoms.

The common argument is, "If you aren't doing something wrong then you don't have anything to fear". But some critics claim that the current surveillance system by government have implied the above statement as "As long as you do what you are told to do, you have nothing to fear."

In spite of the on-going arguments between anti and pro-surveillance activists and various law suits that have become world famous for their contradictory issues, we find these reflected in many literary works of which we find many of which seem to show a lot of concern for its fascist and totalitarian tendencies.

Literary examples

The novel 'Handmaid's Tale' by Margaret Atwood portrays a totalitarian Christian theocracy where all citizens are kept under constant surveillance depicting a perverted, misogynistic philosophy.

'The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo', by the Swedish author Steig Larson has the central character called Lisbeth Salander who uses computers to get information on people as well as other common surveillance methods as a free lancer.

The novel 'The Circle' by David Egger, shows a single company called The Circle that produces all the latest and highest technological gadgets from computer smart phones to surveillance cameras known as 'Sea-Change' cameras. The company becomes associated with politics by movement where politicians must become transparent by wearing Sea-Change cameras on their body so that they cannot keep any secrets from the public. The Circle believes that everyone should have access to all information freely.

One major goal of The Circle is to have the entire world's information filtered through their organisation, a process they call as 'The Completion'. In such situation this single company will have full access and control over all information and privacy of government as well as individuals. But Gospodinov, who is one of the founders of The Circle shows his concern by pointing out that it will give too much power and control to the company and soon may lead to totalitarianism.

Analysis

Recently a new branch called 'Surveillance studies' has originated. Over the past 20 years surveillance has become an increasingly important topic within both academic and public debate. Surveillance is an ancient social process. It has always been a component of institutional routines and human sociality as pointed out by Locke in 2010.

How are we to understand the growth of surveillance as a general social phenomenon, one that is apparent globally although with distinctive local inflections in different countries and context as stated by Haruki Murakami in 2009 in book 'Wood', Through literary and cinematic example of Thomas Moore's Utopia (1516) to Neil Blomkamp's Elysium (2013), which explore the utopian dreaming, in a broad sense we can imagine what to expect in the past, present and future surveillance.

David Lyon very well remarks that, "we know about surveillance because we have read about it in a classic novel or seen in a film depicting surveillance (Lyon 2007:139). He further points out that the relation between surveillance and the spectacle is not unidirectional. The imaginary surveillant finds its way into novels, films, song lyrics and other media but on the one hand surveillance is itself influenced by popular culture as the media can shape our attitudes and actions towards surveillance (Lyon 2007:1421 Marks 2005:236)

1984 by George Orwell has been identified as an Ur-surveillance novel by Mike Nellis (Nellis 2009). Big Brother of this book who watches over the novel's characters can be a parody for the various forms of spying and interfering with the public. It has become synonymous to the negative aspects of mass surveillance and its consequences for the Surveillance studies scholars. The novel depicts life under an omnipresent totalitarian state. Similarly two more come under this term.

The Transparent society by David Brin discusses various scenarios for the future considering the spread of cheap web-cameras, the increase in government security initiation and the possible death of encryption if the quantum computing becomes a reality.

Yevgeny Zamyatin's We (1924) can be said to be the first novel about surveillance which was written even before 1984. The narrative is in the form of diary entries by the protagonist who is a mathematician called D-503 who keeps a sort of journal about the totalitarian society in which he lives which is based on scientific and Taylorist principles. D-503 contributes happily his knowledge at first to the algebraic world where life is calculated by algorithms and emotions are "only a matter of technique". Spontaneity and imagination are ripped out by authorities using neurosurgery. The general idea being, "if human liberties equal to zero, man does not commit any crime. That is clear". Everything is fine until D-503 meets a mysterious woman who introduces

him to a strange world beyond the closely guarded city walls. Within the city total control is maintained by having spying tubes in flying vehicles equipped with mechanical ears. Every building has walls, floor, and ceiling of glass so there can be no privacy.

The Castle (1992) by Franz Kafka depicts a world of mistrust, paranoia and despotism that is commonly associated with a surveillance society, though the novel does not feature any hard and fast surveillance technology. The character K arrives in the village where he is supposed to work as a land surveyor. Governing the village is a Castle from which officials give contradictory orders and to whom we can sometimes speak and sometimes not. The Castle represents a self sufficient system that totally neglects the consequences it imposes on its outside world while it wilfully protects itself against any critique by obscuring its inner procedures and decisions.

Kafka's other novel, The Trial deals even more directly with what is considered to be a surveillance society. It is a story of man arrested and prosecuted by an authority that never reveals itself. Despite his repeated efforts to know what he is alleged with while he is never even presented before any court.

The life in Oceania of George Orwell's 1984 seems too familiar today, like the presence of the ubiquitous cameras in public space, at workplace or shopping malls today which remind us of the telescreen, hidden microphones in Winston Smith's everyday life. A society where privacy and human dignity is eroded or abolished completely or the social divisions and exclusions that are fostered warning us about the current trend of our age. The novel 1984 is not much about the outer appearance of surveillance society, but rather more about the psychology in surviving in such society. It is more about the emotions and mutual betrayals all induced by the face of Big Brother and Telescreens.

In our contemporary surveillance society only a few 'serious' novels which deal with the issues of surveillance and control. Most of them were published in the years after 9/11 without explicitly referring to the attacks but rather in the different measures taken in the reference to ongoing war on terror as the authority's phrase.

List of some books

Some of the novels are , What was Lost (2007) by Catherine O' Flynn which alternates between the present and the events that happened 20 years earlier when a little girl went missing in shopping mall.

Little Brother (2008) by Cory Doetrow takes a direct approach in which a group of teenagers defy the near totalitarian emergency rules imposed by the Dept. Of Homeland security in their city after a terrorist attack.

The Seymour Tapes (2005) by Tim Lott portrays a father of a family who covertly installs miniature surveillance cameras in his home.

Surveillance (2005) by Jonathan Raban opens with a supposed terrorist attack on the city of Seattle which is actually orchestrated by the federal authorities to test the civil defence methods. The author clearly describes the "permeation of surveillance technologies and mentalities into everyday lives", of common people. It is aimed mostly at teenage and young adults.

All the above novels have one thing in common i.e.; that the surveillance technologies are presented as a source of problem not the solution. These novels permeate a feeling that this could be or is even happening in current times.

As Peter Marks notes, that fictional works provide stimulating points of reference for surveillance scholars (Marks 2005:222). Apart from this fact we must agree that novels, films or most of the popular culture offers ways to debate publicly on the consequence of surveillance in an academic as well as non-academic discourse.

With reference to these novels, we can say that literature as a part of popular culture can help us to form a bridge between academic discussions and popular perceptions of the public. The public may understand the issues of surveillance more from academic studies. Literature and specially novels such as above can also shape the public imagination by providing metaphors, images and references for discussing and theorising surveillance which in turn can help a scholar of surveillance studies.

Next fact is, as Gary. T. Marx says, "They can help us to get 'inside' a world which we do not yet know."(Marx 2009:390). The fictional narratives in other words, help us understand our present society by providing us with a comparison or alternative world through which we can reflect and question our own situation.

Third fact is as David Lyon points out, that not only is our opinion of surveillance shaped by popular media, but the media also affects in turn the surveillance, as it is portrayed because the consumers of media are also subjects of surveillance (Lyon 2007:155)

II. CONCLUSION

On the whole we can conclude that in the current society which can be frankly called as the 'risk society', surveillance technologies and the legal aspects of law making are continuously endorsed and protested while also rather defended and legitimized by the narratives in the literature of various genres, about what could happen and what must be prevented. These are generally fiction. Even the most narratives that endorse surveillance appeal our imagination and construct certain speculations about the possibilities in the future.

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