

Sociology Factsheet



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Surveillance of Contemporary Culture

Introduction

We have become accustomed within contemporary society to hearing the term **Big Brother**, which means different things to different people. Some of us associate the term with the Reality TV programme **Big Brother**, some of us more literary types associate it with the George Orwell 1949 book *1984*, and some see it as a consequence of late capitalism – the ubiquitous nature of contemporary surveillance cameras everywhere we go.

However, the underlying principle is that we are being watched.

The information in this Factsheet would be relevant to exam questions on the topics of – Crime & Deviance, particularly control, surveillance, prevention & punishment, victims and the role of the criminal justice system and other agencies, Mass Media, and Power & Politics.



Activity

How do you see this term 'Big Brother'? What does it mean to you? How do you feel about being watched?

Surveillance: watching from above – the powerful watching the less powerful.

Activity

Write a paragraph putting that definition of surveillance into context of our contemporary culture.

We tend to think of surveillance as a modern phenomenon. However, Max Weber (1864-1920) wrote about bureaucratic surveillance. Weber defines bureaucracy as a hierarchical entity with power concentrated at the top that requires written rules, information control, and salaried officers.

Activity

So that this definition of a bureaucracy makes sense to you, apply it to:

- Your local council
- The central Government

Weber saw bureaucratic organisations as the most efficient organisation structure for modern life. The successful functioning of a bureaucracy is dependent on: clear-cut lines of authority, written rules, and its ability to watch over and keep control over its members. This monitoring is known as surveillance, and is made possible through the accumulation of information and direct supervision. However, the growth of surveillance brings with it concerns about individual privacy.

It could be argued that the fundamental debate with **surveillance** is safety versus invasion of privacy. It is important, at this point, that you think about your personal response to this debate.

Exam Hint: Developing an argument and being able to see both sides is a very useful technique in an exam response. It clarifies things, and helps to stop you from getting lost in the arguments.

According to a report in The Telegraph 10/07/2013 by David Barratt, a security industry report disclosed that Britain has a CCTV camera for every 11 people, as privacy campaigners criticised the growth of 'surveillance state'; The British Security Industry Authority (BSIA) estimated there are up to 5.9 million closed-circuit television cameras in the country, including 750,000 in 'sensitive locations' such as schools, hospitals and care homes.

Interestingly the article continues with both sides of the argument. Simon Adcock of the BSIA said, "This study represents the most comprehensive and up to date study undertaken into the number of CCTV cameras in use in the UK." He adds, "Effective CCTV schemes are an invaluable source of crime detection and evidence for the police."

For example, in 2009 95% of Scotland Yard murder cases used CCTV footage as evidence.

However, Nick Pickles director of the privacy campaign Big Brother Watch, said, "This report is another stark reminder of how out of control our surveillance culture has become".

The report also states that it is estimated that there are between 291,000 and 373,000 cameras in state schools, plus a further 30,000 to 50,000 in independent schools. Surgeries and health centres have an estimated 80,000 to 159,000, while there are believed to be between 53,000 to 159,000 cameras in restaurants.



Activity

Do a piece of personal research on this – from the moment you get up in the morning on any given day to the time you go to bed, see if you can count how many surveillance cameras you encounter.

Activity

Find out how many cameras there are in your school or college.

Foucault (1973) was interested in social order and power, and particularly in how things come to be known and accepted as facts or how some groups seem to be able to establish claims that become regarded as truth. He looked at how language, cultural practices and social perceptions help people to exercise power and control over others. He saw power as constituted via specific practices that characterise modern societies: surveillance, specialised knowledge and corrective measures. Together, these social practices constitute a form of power over people that does not use force, but makes people visible to those in authority, making them amenable to degrees of control and regulation.

For Foucault, visibility is especially important with reference to disciplinary power. If people don't know when they are being

watched, they are more likely to ensure that they are behaving in appropriate ways. Power is therefore productive for Foucault; it works by persuading people to undertake activities and practices because they believe them to be in their best interests.



Exam Hint: The ability to show critical autonomy by putting theory into your own words rather than regurgitating it will help you to achieve higher marks - it will show greater understanding.

Activity: Try to apply these arguments to your own behaviour. Then weigh up the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments, in other words, evaluate.

Surveillance cameras or CCTV is only one aspect of surveillance; it can take many forms. An article on the website digitaltrends.com asked the question, "Is your smartphone being tracked?" They put this question to experts. Gary S. Miliefsky, CEO of Snoop Wall answers, "Every phone has two operating systems, one that connects to cellular networks, and one that interfaces with the consumer. He suggests that turning your phone to airplane mode may only disable features in the consumer operating system, but not in the OS used between the phone and the carrier network."

A phone may be giving out a 'ping' and you'd never know it. It doesn't even need to be sending out GPS co-ordinates – communicating at all with a cell tower could expose you. The expert continues, "At short range you can be tracked by Wi-Fi. Every time you turn Wi-Fi on, your phone is sending out a signal that includes your unique MAC address, which is a kind of fingerprint for digital devices. The solution to this he argues is to avoid unencrypted public Wi-Fi."

Activity

Do some research into how vulnerable you are to snooping with a smart phone, then perhaps compare notes with fellow students.

So, what is the law on this?

The Draft Communications Data Bill (given the nickname 'Snoopers Charter' is summarised on the government website www.parliament.uk. For further research, look up the following: Draft Communications Data Bill – Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for the Home Department by Command of Her Majesty. June 2012.

The salient points are:

- It is the duty of the Government to maintain safety and security of citizens.
- Therefore, law enforcement agencies must be given the tools they need.
- Reasonable access to some communication data is one of those tools.
- The Government also has a duty to respect the right of citizens to go about their lawful activities, including their communications, without avoidable intrusions to their privacy.

The summary ends with the resolution of this conflict:

- We believe our recommendations would result in a Bill which would give the law enforcement agencies the essential tools they need to tackle serious crime and terrorism but at the same time limit the risk of intrusion into the privacy of the vast majority of honest systems.

Theresa May (the then Home Secretary) had intended to introduce this Bill in 2012-13, but was blocked. However, shortly after the Conservative win in the May 2015 Election, Theresa May vowed to introduce the Communications Data Bill in this Parliament. In November 2015, May announced a new Draft Investigatory Powers Bill, which is similar to the Draft Communications Data Bill, though with limited powers.



According to snooperscharter.co.uk, this new Investigatory Powers Bill is a new law that will give the UK police and security agencies massive powers to collect, analyse and look at our private communications and internet use. The state does not need surveillance powers to fight serious crime and terrorism, this law goes too far.

They argue that this Bill will give unprecedented access to our private data. Our web browsing history and app use will be collected, every public and private database we are on can be analysed. They ask the question: How do you know whether the police or security services have looked at your private communications when they shouldn't have? The lack of transparency about surveillance means that we don't know whether surveillance powers are being abused.

Activity

Go onto the Snoopers Charter website and summarise where you stand on this issue. Do you think this Bill goes too far?

The polarised positions on surveillance are exacerbated by 'new media' which has increased all kinds of surveillance in our everyday lives. There are numerous examples of how new media has fed into an increasing sense of social control, e.g. The Telegraph, "24th May 2015 reported that Five internet trolls a day are convicted in the UK, as figures show a ten-fold increase. In 2012 a woman was jailed for 21 weeks for racially aggravated harassment and abuse after she was filmed on a mobile phone racially abusing fellow travellers on the London Tube, which was uploaded onto YouTube and viewed by over 200,000 people."

Activity

Do some research into other cases where social media has been instrumental in bringing about a criminal conviction. For each case, weigh up the arguments for/against surveillance discussed so far, arriving at a conclusion.

So, there are those individuals who see such examples as welcome, and those who think that such surveillance techniques can be used by those in power to monitor and control social protesters, and to condemn all forms of non-conformist behaviour. In terms of the technology, surveillance is actually an integral aspect of mobile phones, as mobile phone signals can be used to locate mobile users, which enables the agencies of social control to find out where we are.



Postmodern society is characterised by a fragmentation of the social structures and an increasing diversity of values. The fragmentation of society is reflected in a similar fragmentation of crime prevention. There is a growing emphasis on private crime prevention and more informal local arrangements for controlling crime. More use of private control agencies, such as security firms who control such places as shopping complexes. Surveillance technology is used to monitor and control everyone, regardless of whether they are offenders or not, to promote and ensure conformity.

Activity

Using your knowledge of the topics of Crime & Deviance and Power & Politics, explain why we are seeing more use of private control agencies.

Foucault (1991) suggested that surveillance is penetrating more and more into the private aspects of our lives, which is exacerbated by the round-the-clock surveillance technologies such as CCTV and ANPR (Automatic Number Plate Recognition) systems, which monitor everyone, regardless of whether they are innocent or not, in every aspect of life. This includes emails, social media, and websites.

There is also consumer tracking, where massive amounts of data are collected on individuals. According to an article in The Guardian 8th June 2013 by Donna Ferguson entitled 'How supermarkets get your data - and what they do with it', for every loyalty point or coupon Sainsbury's, Tesco and other supermarkets dish out, they gobble up a huge amount of information about our shopping habits. Even if you opt out of taking out a loyalty card, supermarkets track debit and credit card payment data and till receipts so someone, somewhere, knows about that bottle of wine that you bought at 12.28pm on Tuesday, and that you recently switched your brand of athlete's foot cream. If customers have a loyalty card or shop online, the supermarkets will build up a demographic profile of them, and collect data about how loyal they are, what they buy and how much they spend. They can then change what a customer sees when they log in, to make it easier to find the products their data suggests they buy, they will also use the data to make decisions about what they sell.

Foucault argues that this widespread external surveillance promotes conformity as the uncertainty about whether or not we are being monitored encourages us to internalise surveillance by monitoring and controlling our own behaviour.

**Activity**

Speak to family members to find out how much they know about data collection in supermarkets, and if possible broaden this out to more people to see whether it is common knowledge or mostly unknown. Then write up a newspaper article for a local newspaper on your findings.

Surveillance is a characteristic of late modernity – the monitoring of populations in many ways, from CCTV to ID cards. This can be linked to new social movements. Certainly, in modern politics there is a great deal going on at the moment with regard to human rights and freedom movements. This can be linked to safeguarding existing rights to freedom of speech, freedom of movement, and political participation, and campaigning for greater transparency in terms of state activities where technology has given governments a hugely enhanced repertoire of strategies.

Activity

See what you can find out about social movements related to surveillance, and link this to the topic of Power & Politics.

Activity

Fill in the table below, as to which aspects of this Factsheet belong in which topic category – Mass Media, Crime & Deviance and Power & Politics.

Mass Media	Crime & Deviance	Power & Politics

Exam Hint: Though you may or may not encounter a specific question on “surveillance”, it would be relevant in any number of questions, as previously discussed, within the topics: Mass Media, Crime & Deviance, Power & Politics. You would discuss surveillance with reference to New Media; surveillance has increased exponentially with the onset of new media. You would also discuss surveillance with reference to crime prevention or postmodernism and crime, or human rights and freedoms. In these cases, theory should be embedded in your response, particularly postmodernism. Examples and illustrations should also be included, along with any research you may have done.