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“Intelligence Led Surveillance” and Britain’s Police State: The Manufacture of “Mass Surveillance by Consent”

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Is mass surveillance so bad if you can’t see it?

In the dark ages known as the twentieth century, mass surveillance of entire populations was a sport practised only by elitist totalitarian states . Those unlucky enough to live in what was then termed a “free country”, had to sit on the sidelines and simply imagine what it was like to be subject to constant state intrusion.

But times change, and after several wars of the twentieth century (including the war to end all wars) mass surveillance was finally liberated. The liberators of surveillance even adopted a snappy slogan to help spread their evangelic message, which today is more commonly used than that one about washing up liquid – “nothing to hide, nothing to fear”. Don’t bother de-constructing this slogan in any way – just marvel at its symmetry and its almost Shakespearean rhythm.

Image by T.J.Blackwell

You see the secret to success of the architects of “surveillance for all” was they spotted that surveillance is so much easier to sell to the masses when it’s invisible.

Take for instance roadside checkpoints. Some unenlightened people, who hadn’t yet adopted the officially sanctioned acceptance of surveillance, didn’t like being stopped by uniformed officials and being asked to produce their papers and explain their movements. So like sweetening a bitter pill to make a child take their medicine, the surveilligalitarians introduced automation.

Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) cameras were first developed back in the dark days of the 1970s in Britain [1]. The Home Office had a team of very clever boffins who beavered away in their Scientific Development Branch to develop a system to film number

plates on vehicles and then convert the image into electronic letters and numbers. Those letters and numbers could then be fed into a new type of magic box known as a “computer”. The theory was that these “computers” could then do very clever things like compare the numbers and letters to those on a list of cars and go “ping” when it filmed a car from the list.

The year of the subversives

A secret test system was placed on the M1 motorway in England which was spotted by a trouble making New Scientist journalist in 1984 (no really!). That journalist was called Steve Connor, and he wrote an article [2] showing little understanding of the ground breaking contribution to the world of surveillance equality that was being done by the Home Office. Connor it seems was concerned that the list of “stolen vehicles” on the Police National Computer wasn’t just made up of stolen vehicles, it also contained vehicles of “interest” to the police and those “seen or checked in noteworthy circumstances”; he wrote:

> The Home Office refuses to give assurances that the equipment will not eventually be employed in monitoring the movements of vehicles falling into these categories. A spokeswoman said: “At the moment there is no intention of using it for anything other than detecting stolen cars.” But, she added, this is flexible. As she put it: “When the Russians take over next week things might change.”

The Home Office unlike Connor saw that surveillance is a laughing matter and did all they could to put the fun back into state spying.

Not everyone unfortunately got the joke. Also in 1984 (I know what is it with that year and anti-surveillance subversives?) the Greater London Council (GLC) produced a report [3] that looked at how the police were using their newfangled “computers”. They had spotted that police were using the new Police National Computer (PNC) to manually run more random checks on vehicles. The act of running a check on a plate meant that invisible alerts were being sent to the British secret police, known then as now as special branch, with regard to vehicles of “interest”.

For instance, if special branch were monitoring a meeting of union leaders (at date of writing this remains a perfectly legal activity), and noted the car number plates of those attending, and put them in the PNC as vehicles of “interest”, and if a policeman subsequently stopped one of those cars for any reason (such as a defective headlamp) and ran a check on the car, then, unknown to the policeman or the driver, special branch would be sent an alert telling them when and where the vehicle had been spotted. The GLC were worried about the expanded reach of special branch as a result of the computerised vehicle lists (also known as indexes) and the danger of hooking these up to automatic cameras. The GLC report said:

> The increasing rate of vehicle checking by the ordinary police officer therefore acts to enlarge the scope of Special Branch surveillance. Although it is not general police policy to gather and collate information on every vehicle of ‘interest’ to the police, the structure of the PNC’s [Police National Computer] indexes, and the use of devices that read car number plates automatically, leave mass surveillance as a policy to be determined independently by the police. This possibility in a democracy is unacceptable.

What the GLC forgot was that in the surveillance Garden of Eden (or surveilleden) that was t come ,"democracy" would just become another sort of slogan with little opportunity for the surveilled masses (or survmassed) to actually influence very much.

Technocop

Thankfully 1984 only lasted a year and then 1985 arrived. Unfortunately some people thought it was still 1984 and still weren't on board with automated checkpoints. One group of such people was the British Society for Responsibility in Science (BSSRS) who published a book called Techocop [4] in which they said of the automatic checking of number plates against lists of vehicles:

> This type of technology clearly represents a significant increase in the power of the state. Instead of civil liberties, we have the police taking liberties. We no longer have the individual presumed innocent until found guilty, or at least until found suspicious. Increasingly we will have the individual presumed guilty, or at least suspicious, until (temporarily) cleared by the electronic message of 'NO TRACE'. And it doesn't take much imagination to see how the same principle could be extended to other areas of social life.

What the BSSRS failed to grasp was that of course the police were taking liberties, they need to do that to keep us safe, and anyway why would you want liberties, surely only criminals want those. In those days though some subversives continued to believe that law abiding members of the public should have liberties.

A few years later in 1994 this issue was finally resolved by the Westminster Government, when it was decided that the "liberties" that the BSSRS and their types wanted shouldn't be called liberties at all. Instead they should be called "so-called liberties". And so it was that the then Prime Minister, John Major, as he launched a Home Office surveillance cameras guidance booklet [5], boldly said:

> I have no doubt we will hear some protest about a threat to civil liberties. Well I have no sympathy what so ever for so-called liberties of that kind.

But the troublemakers in the BSSRS were complaining about more than just "so-called liberties". They were concerned about how the new "computers" were shaping the entire field of policing, particularly the use of what the police were calling "intelligence" – known to ordinary people as information. Somehow information becomes "intelligence" when a policeman says it is relevant or could be relevant in some way. For instance gossip in the pub about a bloke who has got a nice car – to a policeman could become "intelligence" (and get entered into a computer) if he thinks maybe that bloke is a baddie who probably stole the car or bought it with money from selling stolen potatoes or something.

The police were able to use "community policing" to get into the community and gather this gossip, sorry, I mean intelligence. The big difference was that in the past police obtained information after a crime to help solve it, now they collect it before the event to supposedly predict crime, or with computers they can go back after the event and study information they already collected. Some people thought this sort of thing was very sensible but some people, like science fiction writer Philip K Dick, who was always banging on about police states, thought [6]:

> Any society in which people meddle in other people's business is not a good society, and a state in which the government "knows more about you than you know about yourself," […] is a state that must be overthrown.

But then he would say that, he wrote that mad Tom Cruise film with the eye tracking, he was probably just trying to sell more books.

Anyway, in their 1985 book Technocop the BSSRS pointed out that this way of police gathering and then acting upon "intelligence" was also known as "targeting and surveillance", which has its origins in the military. But the BSSRS were way off the mark – with regard to timing at least. What they were describing wouldn't be formalised in the UK police until the 1990s when the Kent police force tried a new model which became known for some reason as the Kent Policing Model or KPM. This model was promoted by the Chief Constable of Kent Police who was also back then the President of the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), which in 1996 changed from a quasi police union into a corporatised, professional lobbying body for the police [7].

The Kent Policing Model would have repercussions not just in Kent, or even just the UK but across the world as the new style of policing was adopted internationally and pushed by the US based International Association of Chiefs of Police. This new style of policing was named "intelligence-led policing" and it was left up to the police to decide whether this was the correct way to shape society. After all, it makes no sense to get spies to ask their targets if spying is the right thing to do…

So you can see that the early attempts at automated roadside checkpoints were not everybody's cup of tea but this is not why they weren't immediately rolled out across the nation. The reason was that back in the twentieth century computers were the size of large houses and as slow as snails with shells on their backs the size of an enormous computer. The boffins had to keep beavering away and wait for the new millennium to usher in computers as small as actual snails but much faster.

With the dawning of the twenty first century (or the surveillennium) all of the ingredients finally came together:

- smaller and lower cost technology;
- a political class committed to surveillance whether it was needed or not;
- a police force willing to go it alone and build a nationwide network of number plate cameras without the need for outdated things like say a public debate;
- a new policing model called "intelligence led policing".

Interestingly, as mentioned earlier in this article, the last of these ingredients, "intelligence led policing", was ushered in by the very same body that has worked tirelessly to construct a nationwide network of number plate recognition cameras – the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO). ACPO lobbied the Home Office to remodel the entire police service according to a pro-active rather than reactive policing model and they worked with the National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS) to produce the grand sounding National Intelligence Model (NIM) which was really just a re-working of their first attempt at "intelligence led policing", KPM, but sounded better.

The Temple of Hendon

And so it was that in a secure computer facility in Hendon, the police built a temple of surveillance called the National ANPR Data Centre or NADC. This facility was fully switched on or "went live" somewhere between 2005 and 2008 – we don't know exactly when because it's a secret of course [8].

Unlike the stone age number plate cameras in the 1980s the modern system doesn't just link to one list or database of number plates but instead to a whole range of databases with really great modern names like BOF, MIDAS, ELVIS and PIKE [9].

In an age where surveillance is cool number plate cameras are chilling.

Now the system is truly open to all in that it tracks the movements of all vehicles, not just those that are listed as stolen or those of "interest" to the police. No crime needs to be committed to be placed under surveillance, not even reasonable suspicion of involvement in any crime is required. Now everyone in a vehicle can be tracked and the details of when they passed a number plate camera will be stored in a national database for two years – thus allowing the police to go back and check where you were in the past, which could be really handy. After all you might not be a criminal when you pass the camera but you might well become one later.

But even amidst this glistening age of surveillequality there are still, believe it or not, some detractors. Incredibly they're not whining because there isn't enough surveillance – they think there's too much!

A few people think that the move to "intelligence led policing" has led to an excessive focus on the collection of information. They think that a perfect storm is brewing, where the much hyped field of 'Big Data', a term used to describe the use of computers to look for patterns in large data sets, will join together with constant surveillance and lead to a society where individual freedom is no longer valued. For instance they look at the new policing model being trialled by Kent police (them again) – that of using a new computer tool called Predpol [10] as part of what is known as "predictive policing", a technology driven extension of "intelligence led policing". They are concerned that once again a shift in policing is taking place with no public debate or scrutiny.

But have no fear, these nay sayers are probably the sort of people who believe in "so-called liberties" so they won't break through into the mainstream media very often.

Anyway the mainstream media is now directing its focus on the security services and how they act in the name of "keeping us all safe". One can't help but wonder however what happens when the whole state and its every function become one massive security service. Didn't George Orwell have something to say about that? The mainstream media certainly don't. Must be not happening then.

Part one of this article quoted a British parliamentary select committee who wrote a report in 1818, before there was a professional police service in the UK. They wrote about the dangers inherent in an organised police force and the values essential to a free society. But they had more to warn us about because they feared that the new police would be focussed on preventative measures, or what has now become known as "intelligence led policing":

> It is no doubt true, that to prevent crime is better than to punish it; but the difficulty is not in the end but the means, and though Your Committee could

> imagine a system of police that might arrive at the object sought for ; yet in a free country, or even in one where any unrestrained intercourse of society is admitted, such a system would of necessity be odious and repulsive, and one which no government could be able to carry into execution. In despotic countries it has never yet succeeded to the extent aimed at by those theorists ; and among a free people, the very proposal would be rejected with abhorrence : it would be a plan which would make every servant of every house a spy on the actions of his master, and all classes of society spies on each other.
> ***p32, 'Third report from the Committee on the State of the Police of the Metropolis' (1818)***

Ironically the police force in Britain was first introduced to allay growing concerns of heavy-handed tactics used by the military in dealing with domestic public disorder. Despite assurances, the public at the time were concerned that the new police were merely the army in blue uniforms. Now, almost two hundred years later, the militarisation of the police force, with an allegedly consenting population, is almost complete – we have come full circle to what was feared at their inception as the police become the military once more. All we can hope is that there are enough nay sayers to raise the alarm.

Notes:

[1] For more background on ANPR see the No CCTV Report 'What's Wrong With ANPR?' http://www.no-cctv.org.uk/whats_wrong_with_anpr.asp
[2] 'Secret eye scans motorway', Steve Connor, New Scientist 12th January 1984
[3] 'Police computers and the metropolitan police', Dr Chris Pounder for the Greater London Council Police Committee, 1985 (adopted by the GLC 17th July 1984)
[4] 'TechnoCop: New Police Technologies', BSSRS Technology of Political Control Group, Free Association Books, 1985
[5] Launch of 'CCTV: Looking Out For You', reported in Independent, 27 February 1994
[6] Phillip K Dick, 'If You Find This World Bad, You Should See Some of the Others', speech at the second Festival International de la Science-Fiction de Metz, France, September 1977
[7] the quasi union part was recast as the Chief Police Officers' Staff Association (CPOSA)
[8] In their excellent article on the secretive nature of the ANPR network ('Ring of Steel – How the secretive spread of networked surveillance helped turn Britain into one of the world's most watched countries') James Bridle and SA Mathieson write:
"Thus a system shrouded in secrecy is compelled to prioritise that secrecy over the full exercise of the law, degrading justice in the same manner in which secret courts and secret intelligence have led to the gradual erosion of ancient legal rights, among them habeas corpus."
Article available at https://www.readmatter.com/a/ring-of-steel/
[9] BOF = Back Office Function
MIDAS = Motor Insurance Database Application System
ELVIS = regional stolen vehicle databases which covers Merseyside (according to 2004 Home Office report 'Driving crime down')
PIKE = a national database of LGV and commercial vehicles of interest (according to 2004 Home Office report 'Driving crime down')
[10] http://www.statewatch.org/news/2013/mar/01uk-predictive-policing.htm

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