

COVID-19 Tracing Methods: United Nations Special Rapporteur Warns of Danger of “Intrusive Surveillance”

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Global Research, November 04, 2020

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On October 29, 2020, Joseph Cannataci, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Privacy delivered an address to the General Assembly warning that “Widespread use of contact tracing technology to fight the Covid-19 pandemic has led to almost incessant and omnipresent surveillance in some parts of the world.”

Cannataci continued:

“This is a very disturbing trend; all-pervasive surveillance is no panacea for COVID-19” According to the news release, he was “concerned about reports of personal and health data being used to exert control over citizens, possibly to little public health effect.”

The UN Secretary-General expressed exactly his own concern that “certain governments or national entities are using the pretext of COVID to increase surveillance and limit the space for dialogue.”

This is an alarming trend, and the General Assembly’s Third Committee (Human Rights) held an interactive dialogue on 29 October, 2020 with the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Privacy. The resolution on the right to privacy in the digital age has been adopted by the Third Committee since the sixty-eighth session without a vote. This year, Brazil and Germany introduced an updated draft, which covers such topics as use of artificial intelligence, spread of misinformation, digital divides, and protection of the right to privacy while developing technological means in response to disasters, epidemics and pandemics (COVID-19). As of today, this draft has been co-sponsored by more than 40 Member States.

This concern is paramount, as wide-spread, and, indeed, targeted surveillance has been used to terrorize people, a devastating example of which occurred during the McCarthy witch-hunts in the United States. These abuses did not end with McCarthy’s demise, as the FBI continued dictatorial abuse of their powers, keeping under illegal surveillance such public leaders as Martin Luther King, the renowned actress Jean Seberg, and any and all dissidents during the anti-Vietnam war organizations in the USA, and the Sanctuary Movement. The surveillance and lies spread about the courageous American actress Jean Seberg were tantamount to psychological rape, staggering and criminal violation of all the most intimate spaces of her life. This violation of her privacy led to her suicide, a goal undoubtedly sought by the Bureau. The FBI was often complicit in murder of both well-

known and little-known dissidents, including the Black Panthers, who were, almost to a man, murdered.

An important documentation of this deadly national surveillance by the FBI was published in the non-fiction book, "The Burglary," by Washington Post correspondent, Betty Metzger. Files violating the privacy, violating the most intimate spaces of the lives of peaceful demonstrators, were compiled in the so-called democracy of the USA, and these abuses of privacy, rationalized by pseudo-threats to "national security" have been a scourge and a menace to the lives of American citizens. One of the most scandalous and egregious examples of FBI Gestapo tactics can be summarized by J. Edgar Hoover's description of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt as "The most dangerous woman in America." The FBI file on the widow of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, was larger than 6000 pages. Her authorship of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was considered communist propaganda. Eleanor Roosevelt described the FBI as an American Gestapo, the description of them also used by Ernest Hemingway, whom they hounded to suicide.

The abuse of Covid-19 intimate personal data provides a perfect opportunity and mask for political repression, and ultimately for political violence. The United Nations attention to this danger is crucial. It is also a recognition that certain so-called conspiracy theories may be based on fact.

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