

Chapter 1

Introduction: On the “Birth” of Ubertveillance

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ABSTRACT

When or how uberveillance will be implemented in its full-blown manifestation is still a subject for some intriguing discussion and a topic of robust disagreement, but what is generally accepted by most of the interlocutors is that an “uberveillance society” will emerge sooner rather than later, and that one way or another this will mean an immense upheaval in all of our societal, business, and government relationships. What is apparent from the numerous qualitative and quantitative studies conducted is that microchipping people is a discernibly divisive issue. If we continue on the current trajectory, we will soon see further divisions – not just between those who have access to the Internet and those who do not, but between those who subjugate themselves to be physically connected to the Web of Things and People, and those who are content enough to simply have Internet connectivity through external devices like smart phones, to those who opt to live completely off the grid. Time will only tell how we as human-beings will adapt after we willingly adopt innovations with extreme and irreversible operations. This introduction serves to provide a background context for the term uberveillance, which has received significant international attention since its establishment.

INTRODUCTION

Ultimately, the big choices must be made by citizens, who will either defend their freedom or surrender it, as others did in the past. -David Brin (1998), The Transparent Society.

The conception of the word *uberveillance* came about during question time at the conclusion of a class I was guest lecturing on the “Consequences of Innovation” in May of 2006 at the University of Wollongong. In that enthusiastic group of young men and women were a number of my former students. One of these, who was at the time completing his honors research project with Katina Michael, asked the key question: “So then, where is all this [surveillance] heading?” I pondered for a moment searching for a word

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or term which would summarize what I was ‘seeing’ in my mind’s eye and what I had been reflecting upon for a long time: a coming together of Big Brother, dataveillance, microchip implants, RFID, GPS, A-LBS, Apocalypse (Rev 13), and Übermensch. There was nothing I could think of that would capture all of these indispensable components and hybrid architectures of the trajectory of electronic surveillance and information gathering, including the wider implications of the “technological society” as I had understood it from my study of Jacques Ellul and his analysis of “technique” (Ellul 1967). If technique is that component of technology which has *maximum efficiency*, that is, “the totality of methods” as its primary goal, then uberveillance can be understood in similar terms insofar as surveillance is concerned.

BACKGROUND

So here is something of the background that led to the birth of *Uberveillance* and a summary of the fundamental components of the term.

During my preparation for the class which would also include readings from Martin Heidegger (1982) *The Question Concerning Technology*, Paul Feyerabend (1978) *Against Method*, Everett M. Rogers (1995) *Diffusion of Innovations*, and Richard S. Rosenberg (2004) *The Social Impact of Computers*, I came across one of Franz Kafka’s fascinating letters to Milena Jesenská on “intercourse with ghosts”. A powerful albeit little critique on the underlying structures of industrial technology and the resulting consequences on communication, “[t]he ghosts won’t starve, but we will perish” (Kafka 1999). Fyodor Dostoevsky another of the great students on the conditions of bureaucracy and isolation, held similar reservations and concerns with a designed utopia, represented at the time by his experience of Saint Petersburg. *Notes from Underground*, still has much to say to ‘Technological Man’ in pursuit of the “golden dream” (Dostoevsky, 1992). Writers with these sorts of sensibilities and philosophical intelligence, such as Kafka and Dostoevsky, have fascinated me since my undergraduate days when I first stumbled upon them after reading Nietzsche with Paul Crittenden (2008) at Sydney University, more than thirty years ago. This genre of writing, roughly categorized “existentialist”, awakened in me deep-seated sensitivities to do with abuses in bureaucracy and in the practices of the ruling elite.

I had also spent time thinking on Ray Kurzweil’s (2005) “singularity” and the connection of exponential growth on the future prospects of surveillance. Later, having arrived in this ‘place’ after the convergence of a number of interrelated subjects, I would continue to discover many more intuitive and forward thinking authors in the emerging fields of privacy advocacy and surveillance studies. Authors, who would both inform and challenge me with their cutting-edge work. This is a long and imposing list from which I have had the privilege in a number of instances to have together presented at conferences, to have co-authored with, or to have published papers as an editor. One of the key texts that I would discover from that time was the seminal publication of David Lyon’s *The Electronic Eye: The Rise of Surveillance Society* (1994).

Two other important works which have not dated on account of their continuing significance and which I turned to in the earlier years before the great and imposing flood of later surveillance and privacy literature are Simon Davies’ (1992) *Big Brother: Australia’s Growing Web of Surveillance*, and Anne Wells Branscomb’s (1994) *Who Owns Information?* I would go back to these books, better still *testimonies*, when I feared that I might be reading too much into what I was finding or had been overly reliant on my intuition. The ultimate questions which Davies and Branscomb pose to do with the *gathering*, *storing*, and *distribution* of information, not only remain paramount but are even more momentous today.

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