Digital Authoritarianism: AI Surveillance Signals the Death of Privacy

Description

"There are no private lives. This a most important aspect of modern life. One of the biggest transformations we have seen in our society is the diminution of the sphere of the private. We must reasonably now all regard the fact that there are no secrets and nothing is private. Everything is public." ? Philip K. Dick

Nothing is private.

We teeter on the cusp of a cultural, technological and societal revolution the likes of which have never been seen before.

While the political Left and Right continue to make abortion the face of the debate over the right to privacy in America, the government and its corporate partners, aided by rapidly advancing technology, are reshaping the world into one in which there is no privacy at all.

Nothing that was once private is protected.

We have not even begun to register the fallout from the tsunami bearing down upon us in the form of AI (artificial intelligence) surveillance, and yet it is already re-orienting our world into one in which freedom is almost unrecognizable.

AI surveillance harnesses the power of artificial intelligence and widespread surveillance technology to do what the police state lacks the manpower and resources to do efficiently or effectively: be everywhere, watch everyone and everything, monitor, identify, catalogue, cross-check, cross-reference, and collude.

Everything that was once private is now up for grabs to the right buyer.

Governments and corporations alike have heedlessly adopted AI surveillance technologies without any care or concern for their long-term impact on the rights of the citizenry.

As a special report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace warns, "A growing number of

states are deploying advanced AI surveillance tools to monitor, track, and surveil citizens to accomplish a range of policy objectives—some lawful, others that violate human rights, and many of which fall into a murky middle ground."

Indeed, with every new AI surveillance technology that is adopted and deployed without any regard for privacy, Fourth Amendment rights and due process, the rights of the citizenry are being marginalized, undermined and eviscerated.

Cue the rise of digital authoritarianism.

Digital authoritarianism, as the Center for Strategic and International Studies cautions, involves the use of information technology to surveil, repress, and manipulate the populace, endangering human rights and civil liberties, and co-opting and corrupting the foundational principles of democratic and open societies, "including freedom of movement, the right to speak freely and express political dissent, and the right to personal privacy, online and off."

The seeds of digital authoritarianism were planted in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, with the passage of the USA Patriot Act. A massive 342-page wish list of expanded powers for the FBI and CIA, the Patriot Act justified broader domestic surveillance, the logic being that if government agents knew more about each American, they could distinguish the terrorists from law-abiding citizens.

It sounded the death knell for the freedoms enshrined in the Bill of Rights, especially the Fourth Amendment, and normalized the government's mass surveillance powers.

Writing for the *New York Times*, Jeffrey Rosen observed that "before Sept. 11, the idea that Americans would voluntarily agree to live their lives under the gaze of a network of biometric surveillance cameras, peering at them in government buildings, shopping malls, subways and stadiums, would have seemed unthinkable, a dystopian fantasy of a society that had surrendered privacy and anonymity."

Who could have predicted that 50 years after George Orwell typed the final words to his dystopian novel *1984*, "He loved Big Brother," we would come to love Big Brother.

Yet that is exactly what has come to pass.

After 9/11, Rosen found that "[people were happy to give up privacy without experiencing a corresponding increase in security](). More concerned about feeling safe than actually being safe, they demanded the construction of vast technological architectures of surveillance even though the most empirical studies suggested that the proliferation of surveillance cameras had 'no effect on violent crime' or terrorism."

In the decades following 9/11, a massive security-industrial complex arose that was fixated on militarization, surveillance, and repression.

Surveillance is the key.

We're being watched everywhere we go. Speed cameras. Red light cameras. Police body cameras. Cameras on public transportation. Cameras in stores. Cameras on public utility poles. Cameras incars. Cameras in hospitals and schools. Cameras in airports.

We're being recorded at least 50 times a day.

It's estimated that there are upwards of 85 million surveillance cameras in the U.S. alone, second only to China.

On any given day, the average American going about his daily business is monitored, surveilled, spied on and tracked in more than 20 different ways by both government and corporate eyes and ears.

Beware of what you say, what you read, what you write, where you go, and with whom you communicate, because it will all be recorded, stored and used against you eventually, at a time and place of the government's choosing.

Yet it's not just what we say, where we go and what we buy that is being tracked.

We're being surveilled right down to our genes, thanks to a potent combination of hardware, software and data collection that scans our biometrics—our faces, irises, voices, genetics, microbiomes, scent, gait, heartbeat, breathing, behaviors—runs them through computer programs that can break the data down into unique "identifiers," and then offers them up to the government and its corporate allies for their respective uses.

As one AI surveillance advocate proclaimed, "Surveillance is no longer only a watchful eye, but a predictive one as well." For instance, Emotion AI, an emerging technology that is gaining in popularity, uses facial recognition technology "to analyze expressions based on a person's faceprint to detect their internal emotions or feelings, motivations and attitudes." China claims its AI surveillance can already read facial expressions and brain waves in order to determine the extent to which members of the public are grateful, obedient and willing to comply with the Communist Party.

This is the slippery slope that leads to the thought police.

The technology is already being used "by border guards to detect threats at border checkpoints, as an aid for detection and diagnosis of patients for mood disorders, to monitor classrooms for boredom or disruption, and to monitor human behavior during video calls."

For all intents and purposes, we now have a fourth branch of government: the surveillance state.

This fourth branch came into being without any electoral mandate or constitutional referendum, and yet it possesses superpowers, above and beyond those of any other government agency save the military. It is all-knowing, all-seeing and all-powerful. It operates beyond the reach of the president, Congress and the courts, and it marches in lockstep with the corporate elite who really call the shots in Washington, DC.

The government's "technotyranny" surveillance apparatus has become so entrenched and entangled with its police state apparatus that it's hard to know anymore where law enforcement ends and surveillance begins.

The short answer: they have become one and the same entity. The police state has passed the baton to the surveillance state, which has shifted into high gear with the help of artificial intelligence technologies. The COVID-19 pandemic helped to further centralize digital power in the hands of the government at the expense of the citizenry's privacy rights.

"From cameras that identify the faces of passersby to algorithms that keep tabs on public sentiment online, artificial intelligence (AI)-powered tools are opening new frontiers in state surveillance around the world." So begins the Carnegie Endowment's report on AI surveillance note. "Law enforcement, national security, criminal justice, and border management organizations in every region are relying on these technologies—which use statistical pattern recognition, machine learning, and big data analytics—to monitor citizens."

In the hands of tyrants and benevolent dictators alike, AI surveillance is the ultimate means of repression and control, especially through the use of smart city/safe city platforms, facial recognition systems, and predictive policing. These technologies are also being used by violent extremist groups, as well as sex, child, drug, and arms traffickers for their own nefarious purposes.

China, the role model for our dystopian future, has been a major force in deploying AI surveillance on its own citizens, especially by way of its social credit systems, which it employs to identify, track and segregate its "good" citizens from the "bad."

Social media credit scores assigned to Chinese individuals and businesses categorize them on whether or not they are worthy of being part of society. A real-name system—which requires people to use government-issued ID cards to buy mobile sims, obtain social media accounts, take a train, board a plane, or even buy groceries—coupled with social media credit scores ensures that those blacklisted as "unworthy" are banned from accessing financial markets, buying real estate or travelling by air or train. Among the activities that can get you labeled unworthy are taking reserved seats on trains or causing trouble in hospitals.

In much the same way that Chinese products have infiltrated almost every market worldwide and altered consumer dynamics, China is now exporting its "authoritarian tech" to governments worldwide ostensibly in an effort to spread its brand of totalitarianism worldwide. In fact, both China and the United States have led the way in supplying the rest of the world with AI surveillance, sometimes at a subsidized rate.

This is how totalitarianism conquers the world.

While countries with authoritarian regimes have been eager to adopt AI surveillance, as the Carnegie Endowment's research makes clear, liberal democracies are also "aggressively using AI tools to police borders, apprehend potential criminals, monitor citizens for bad behavior, and pull out suspected terrorists from crowds."

Moreover, it's easy to see how the China model for internet control has been integrated into the

American police state's efforts to flush out so-called anti-government, domestic extremists.

According to journalist Adrian Shahbaz's in-depth report, there are nine elements to the Chinese model of digital authoritarianism when it comes to censoring speech and targeting activists: 1) dissidents suffer from persistent cyber attacks and phishing; 2) social media, websites, and messaging apps are blocked; 3) posts that criticize government officials are removed; 4) mobile and internet access are revoked as punishment for activism; 5) paid commentators drown out government criticism; 6) new laws tighten regulations on online media; 7) citizens' behavior monitored via AI and surveillance tools; 9) individuals regularly arrested for posts critical of the government; and 9) online activists are made to disappear.

You don't even have to be a critic of the government to get snared in the web of digital censorship and AI surveillance.

The danger posed by the surveillance state applies equally to all of us: lawbreaker and law-abider alike.

When the government sees all and knows all and has an abundance of laws to render even the most seemingly upstanding citizen a criminal and lawbreaker, then the old adage that you've got nothing to worry about if you've got nothing to hide no longer applies.

As Orwell wrote in *1984*, "You had to live—did live, from habit that became instinct—in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized."

In an age of too many laws, too many prisons, too many government spies, and too many corporations eager to make a fast buck at the expense of the American taxpayer, we are all guilty of some transgression or other.

No one is spared.

As Elise Thomas writes for Wired: "New surveillance tech means you'll never be anonymous again."

It won't be long before we find ourselves looking back on the past with longing, back to an age where we could speak to whomever we wanted, buy whatever we wanted, think whatever we wanted, go wherever we wanted, feel whatever we wanted without those thoughts, words and activities being tracked, processed and stored by corporate giants, sold to government agencies, and used against us by militarized police with their army of futuristic technologies.

Tread cautiously: as I make clear in my book Battlefield America: The War on the American People and in its fictional counterpart The Erik Blair Diaries, 1984 has become an operation manual for the omnipresent, modern-day AI surveillance state.

Without constitutional protections in place to guard against encroachments on our rights when power, AI technology and militaristic governance converge, it won't be long before Philip K. Dick's rules for survival become our governing reality: "If, as it seems, we are in the process of becoming a totalitarian society in which the state apparatus is all-powerful, the ethics most important for the survival of the true, free, human individual would be: cheat, lie, evade, fake it, be elsewhere, forge documents, build improved electronic gadgets in your garage that'll outwit the gadgets used by the authorities."

Image: Pixabay

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