



The Church of Scotland

Church and Society Council

Surveillance and Social Justice – May 2017

Section 5. Theories of surveillance

5.1 Earlier forms of surveillance (familiar to anyone who remembers their teacher sitting at a desk on a raised dais at the front of the classroom) could be described as *the few watching the many*. This is the notion of *panoptic* surveillance.

5.2 Such a model is increasingly accompanied by one in which the many watch the few. 'The few' can be those who are deemed to be in some way different: 'them' rather than 'us'; deviant and dangerous rather than normal and law abiding.¹ This can be termed *synoptic* surveillance² - a term that helps draw attention to the ways in which already present 'them-and-us' categories are replayed and reinforced. 'Immigrants', 'benefit scroungers', 'foreigners', and 'Muslims' are each in their own way containers which can then be populated with prejudice and bias.

5.3 There are also practices of "*surveillance from below*" (sousveillance) for example, when protestors record the actions of police officers to secure evidence of civil rights breaches.³ In many cases, surveillance is not targeted at suspects, but at whole populations. That does not mean, however, that the consequences of surveillance are the same for everyone. If you are on welfare benefits you may experience surveillance that is unknown to others fortunate enough to be spared such intrusions into their personal life.⁴

5.4 In much the same way that, to our shame, an Irish accent once aroused suspicion in the UK, or skin colour could be legally used to bar someone from rental accommodation, many Muslims currently find themselves frequently designated as members of an outsider group, assigned to a 'them' rather than 'us' category, and consequently put in danger of physical or verbal attack.

5.5 While surveillance does not impact all equally, the consequences of surveillance do not fall only on minority groups. Anyone using the internet is presented with online advertising, much of it picking up on data from previous searches, seeking to influence not only what you purchase, but possibly affecting how you see the world.⁵ State authorities make the case that it is necessary to be able to break encrypted emails and online messaging on grounds for example of national security or child protection.

[See the full report](#)

¹ Rachel Finn and Michael McCahill, "Representing the Surveilled: Media Representations and Political Discourse in Three UK Newspapers," in *Political Studies Association Conference Proceedings* (2010). quoted in Inga Kroener, "Caught on Camera": The Media Representation of Video Surveillance in Relation to the 2005 London Underground Bombings,' *Surveillance & Society* 11: 1 / 2 (2013), 121-33.

² A term coined in Thomas Mathieson, 'The Viewer Society: Michel Foucault's 'Panopticon' Revisited,' *Theoretical Criminology* 1 (1997), 215-34.

³ Steve Mann, Jason Nolan, and Barry Wellman, 'Sousveillance: inventing and using wearable computing devices for data collection in surveillance environments,' *Surveillance & Society* 1: 3 (2003), 331-55.

⁴ The classic study is John Gilliom, *Overseers of the Poor: Surveillance, Resistance, and the Limits of Privacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

⁵ The personalisation to different users of content within web pages can result in living in a 'filter-bubble' that reinforces rather than challenges one's existing views.