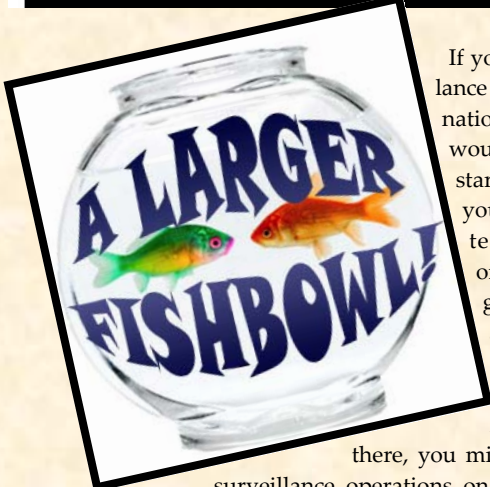




Agitate

Volume 2 Number 12 May 2009
Written and Edited: Michael Andoscia

Journal of a Mad Sociologist
Website: www.madsociologist.net



If you were to design a surveillance system for keeping our nation safe from terrorists how would you do it? You might start by analyzing the data that you already have regarding terrorists and terrorist organizations. If you have good relationships with allied nations you might also be able to tap into their databases to reinforce your own. From

there, you might want to establish legal

surveillance operations on known terrorist organizations and, as further networks are exposed to your analysis, expand your surveillance to include additional branches.

If you follow this method you can maximize your use of intelligence resources by focusing on known threats. You are also minimizing the probability that your system will trammel the rights and expectations of privacy among innocent citizens. You won't eliminate this threat, of course, as social networks are often very complex and intertwined. It's certain that some innocent bystanders will be caught under your surveillance microscope, but their privacy can be restored through new legal means that take our current technology and historical contingencies into account to protect the innocent.

This is a sensible system. One that recognizes the importance of surveillance in maintaining the national security while at the same time minimizing illegal and immoral intrusions on the rights of innocent people. Nothing radical here.

Now, let's say you wanted to create a surveillance system designed to maximize and extend elite power throughout society. How would you design that system? Well, such a system would need access to as much information about as many people as is technologically possible. Every possible intrusion into the lives of individuals, regardless of their affiliations, would have to be maximized. Computer technologies that could filter and sort countless bytes of information would have to be developed. Such a system would have to remain secret, with no accountability to the general public.

In 1975 the French social theorist Michel Foucault used a prison designed by the humanitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham to elaborate a new model of power dynamics. The prison was called a panopticon, and Foucault's theory became panopticism. The panopticon was an idea for a humane prison designed so that a few guards could keep an eye on all prisoners at all times. The idea was that if prisoners knew that there was a certainty that they could be seen at all times then they would adjust their behavior accordingly despite the fact that the guards were not necessarily always looking at them. Prisoners would govern their own behaviors without physical coercion from the guards. It's the power of the gaze.

The Foucaultian idea of panopticism works much the same way for society as a whole. If people know that they can be watched at all times then they will act as if they are being watched at all times. They will be less inclined to participate in acts of deviance or crime. In essence, they will govern their own behaviors in accordance to the dictates of the state without the state having to resort to militaristic technologies of coercion. And, just as with Bentham's prison in which the guards cannot be seen by the prisoners, a Foucaultian panopticon must operate under the awareness of the population, yet under strict secrecy. In other words, one must know that they can be watched at any given time, yet can never see who is watching and when. "In order to be exercised, this power had to be given the instrument of permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance capable of making all visible as long as it could itself remain invisible." (Foucault 214)

Of course, Foucault was talking about rationalized (bureaucratic) institutional power. He saw the regimens of schools, hospitals, clinics, prisons and the military as a non-coercive, though all encompassing, technology of power. This was the 1970's and the level of technology had not developed to the point it has today. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the information age, technology is such that a cyberpanopticism is not only possible, but imminent. The ability of the elite to record and analyze the everyday routines of our lives is at hand. New technologies of power, the likes of which Foucault could only have imagined, are no longer relegated to paranoid science fiction novels. The future is now.

According to author James Bamford the government and its corporate allies have built and are expanding a surveillance infrastructure that can subject every citizen to the power of the gaze. In the meantime, laws are being written to ensure that the exercise of this power remains beyond public scrutiny and outside of any conventions of checks and balances.

This vast infrastructure is being constructed on the premise of fighting terrorism. If such was the case then we could expect that it would be designed much in the manner as the first program described in this essay. It is not. The intelligence infrastructure captained by the NSA is not merely targeting known terrorist groups and individuals in an ever expanding examination of affiliated networks. Indeed, it is being designed to intercept every communication, every commercial transaction, every movement of individual citizens regardless of affiliation. At the same time, legislation is being created to keep those involved in intelligence gathering secret and under the wing of government protection.

A New Member of the Power Elite

In 1954, sociologist C. Wright Mills published the results of his extensive research into the power elite. Mills recognized that the power elite was a collection of institutions working together to perpetuate its own class interests. At the top of this pyramid was corporate executives who, despite the supposition that they are

expected to compete, are actually better served by cooperating with regard to their class interests. Next is the executive branch of government, the President and his cabinet, and the high ranking members of the executive bureaucracy. Then there is the top brass of the military, headquartered in the Pentagon and represented by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

According to Mills, these three institutions share common interests despite what may appear to be very different functions. Indeed, since the advent of the military industrial complex as exposed by none other than President Dwight D. Eisenhower, corporate, political and military power are conjoined in ever tightening bonds. "As each of these domains has convinced with the others, as decisions tend to become total in their consequences, the leading men in each of the three domains of power—the warlords, the corporation chieftains, the political directorate—tend to come together, to form the power elite of America." (Mills 9)

Indeed, they do more than come together. In fact, they overlap in significant ways. The corporations fund political campaigns. Often they hedge their bets by funding both parties. In exchange for important funds the politician agrees to give access to corporate lobbyists, pander to the corporation's legislative wet dreams and appoint corporate representatives to high level cabinet positions. Corporations have also created institutional allies in the military, offering to add industrial might to the military machine. Corporations win major contracts to produce the needs of the military. In exchange for military support, politicians perpetuate the corporate projects regardless of their use. The military thus becomes a major player in the economy. To further the convergence of interests at this highest level, corporations provide comfortable jobs and exorbitant salaries to retired, high ranking officials and military officers. The military continues to grow while the executive continues to feed valuable contracts to corporations that, in turn, provide political and social security to both. It's a cozy relationship.

Now Mills wrote *The Power Elite* in the mid fifties. I'd like to think that if he were conducting this research today he would add a fourth element to this trifecta. In the 1950's the intelligence community was a nascent institution getting its feet wet in the international arena. It was accurate to describe the intelligence community as a fraternal order of ivy league school mates playing a dangerous game of international espionage to greater or lesser effect. Despite the retrospectively obvious distinctions of class in this arena, it's forgivable that Mills did not include them in his description of the power elite.

Fifty years later, the intelligence community has graduated from fraternity to full fledged member in good standing of the power elite. Wars are no longer defined by the movement of armies, battle lines, logistics and tactics. The postmodern army runs on information processing, satellite surveillance, smart weapons and computer hubs often thousands of miles away from the battlefield. Intelligence is also a central aspect of civil law enforcement as the nation is carpeted with surveillance cameras and listening devices. Communication signals can be pulled from the air or culled from convergences of fiber optic cables in select cities in the United States. This communication infrastructure is owned and operated by corporations, already members of the power elite.

As it stands, communications corporations allow intelligence officials to have access to their information. The executive then

distributes this information to civil law enforcement and the military. For their assistance in spying the executive guarantees secrecy and immunity to prosecution for providing information on innocent citizens whose rights have been ignored. High ranking intelligence officials are often pulled from the corporate world, and again, cushy chairs on the boards of directors for intelligence firms await high ranking government and military officials. In return, the executive finds more and more reasons to expand the intelligence community, often by conjuring a secretive and ubiquitous enemy that can only be defeated by surrendering our privacy. Such an enemy is also a boon to the military industrial complex.

Modern surveillance technology and refined intelligence gathering sciences are used to broker the intelligence community a seat at the elite table. In a Foucaultian leap the intelligence community also offers the power elite the prospects of a true social panopticon. By being able to keep an eye on our every move, our every purchase, our every communication, the power elite can motivate our actions.

Oh, it's not so much that citizens who know they are being watched are going to govern their behaviors in the Foucaultian sense. I think Foucault makes some theoretical leaps here. Rather, the power elite can collect vast amounts of data on us as a population. They can then use this data to

learn what is motivating us, our concerns, our fears. Then, they can shape their paradigms, political speeches, advertisements, justifications for war, in such a way that they know we will respond to their liking. They can legislate our fears into reality. They can sell us solutions to our perceived problems, increasing our dependence on the corporate machine. Total Information Awareness equates to total knowledge control.

Our intelligence infrastructure is not designed to fight a war on terror. It is designed to control the motivations of society. Surveillance is not a technology for keeping us safe. Rather it is a method

for perpetuating elite interests that are contradictory to the interests of the commons. As the intelligence community is further integrated into the highest echelons of society, the power elite becomes more monolithic.

That does not mean that the prospects of resistance are lost. Indeed, it requires that those of us who dissent from the concentration of wealth and power demonstrate more courage to speak the truth. We must demand more from the institutions that are supposed to serve our interests. The very first thing we must defeat is the fear that the power elite perpetuates by committing us to war and false patriotism. If we are not to be the pawns of the powerful we must not participate in their games.



If you think I'm kidding about some of this technology, check out the DARPA website at www.darpa.mil and see the stuff they admit they are working on!

Take Action!

A good source of information on surveillance is the site www.surveillance-and-society.org. The New York Times also has a Surveillance of Citizens by Government Topic Alert to keep you abreast of recent stories on this subject. Stay informed and let your representatives know that you will not tolerate any more intrusions into your personal life. Let them know that they should develop a sensible approach to intelligence gathering that does not infringe upon your basic rights. Most importantly, do not buy into political fear mongering!

