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Topic 1: Urban Landscapes

Big Brother in Action: Surveillance for Security vs. Privacy

Today, we live in a society that technology is widely used for surveillance and security along with the other aspects of life. This is the consequence of the man's development in every way during the long journey he started from "out of Africa" about 50.000 years ago. Humankind has the ability to think and invent things as well to combine different types of knowledge and information to gain new insights. These abilities, along with many other skills, make him superior among the other organisms. The agricultural activities allowed people to produce more energy and shelters provided people protection which all together resulted in increased population size. Then people started to move to new places taking the technology with them. They not only passed the technology to new generations, but also developed the existing technology. When we reach today's world, deep impact surveillance scenarios depicted in science-fiction novels of the 20th century, such as 1984 by George Orwell, are already technologically possible.

People living in villages knew each other being most of them relatives. They were taking almost no precautions for security, even not locking the doors at any time. The more the people become mobile, leaving villages settling down in cities, where people are strangers to each other, the more the problems with security increased. The population growth brought the need for a main law to maintain the order and peace within the societies. The need for security and surveillance commenced the use of technology for these purposes. Today, each country has its own system for internal affairs and justice. They have something in common: they use technology to detect crimes, to prevent crimes and to maintain justice.

The fact that the security and surveillance technology has also a 'dark side' was realized immediately after the good side. Secret recordings were used both to trap the criminals but also to blackmail people. Public area recordings shown in television sometimes violated the privacy of individuals. A relatively recent example is Google StreetView, where some people were captured in streets, some other even in their gardens, with their families, friends or dates. Credit/ATM cards useful for shopping, but leaves a track behind as do the bus or plane tickets.

While the integration of technology and urban life got the pace, can be considered as a milestone, September 11 happened and speeded up the integration of surveillance tools within the urban life. After the terrorist attacks, most of the US and European citizens made up their minds about the debate of security vs. privacy and placed themselves on the side of 'secure but not so private'. The importance of privacy was suppressed by fear. Maybe this way of choice is not preferred when compared to a more 'conscious' choice, nevertheless it is an explicitly delivered opinion and indicates that, for most of the people, safe and secure urban environments justifies the privacy risks.

In today's world, sometimes catching criminals is only possible with surveillance tools that reminds 'Big Brother' syndrome. Surveillance cameras in buildings, streets, gas stations, monitoring electronic transactions, transportation tracks, listening phone calls etc. for sure violates the privacy at some point. However, when the innocent people are asked they would prefer to compromise some privacy to keep the public secure and protected. It is even possible that the 'pro' privacy people are not unbiased. If they go through an experience that threatens their life, say a burglary, they would prefer a public surveillance system maybe even monitoring their private land.

As a conclusion, taking into account that tracking the criminals in urban environments is almost only possible with technologically powerful systems with wide coverage, security of the public should prevail over privacy concerns.