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SURVEILLANCE: ARE WE BEING WATCHED, WHO BY, AND DOES IT MATTER? A STUDY TO CAPTURE AN INDIVIDUAL'S DIGITAL FOOTPRINT OVER A 24-HOUR PERIOD

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Abstract

We are living in exponential times: technology is ubiquitous, the boundaries of on-line off-line are becoming undistinguishable, and geographical distances no longer constrict our activities. What will be, and what are, the consequences of existing in a technologically saturated environment? From the moment of conception, the data trail begins, our personas recorded on databases, social networking sites and CCTV as we go about our everyday lives. What impact does such amassment of data have on society, communities and personal identities within the UK? The reality is that the personal totality of exposure to technology development is a significant research challenge to quantify. There is a critical need to capture these activities in some sort of holistic and interconnected manner. This research will provide an ethnographic snapshot of individual exposure to database and surveillance technologies over a 24-hour period, in the process establishing a repeatable methodology to enable quantification of an individual's 21st century digital footprint.

Keywords: Digital Footprint, Privacy, Surveillance, Sousveillance

Has the IS discipline overlooked or turned a 'blind eye' to the issue of surveillance technologies? Here in the UK we are a society that is constantly gazed upon, while we work, as we walk down the street, the government want to read our emails and children now access educational facilities via their fingerprints. On the flipside of this aggressive data harvesting is a society that compliantly uploads intimate family moments to YouTube, collects 'friends' like books via social networking sites, and consents to be continually positioned via location based services apps. We ask what will be, and what are, the consequences of existing in such a technologically saturated and what impact does such amassment of data have on society, communities and personal identities within the UK? The reality is that the personal totality of exposure to technology development is a significant research challenge to quantify. There is a critical need to capture these activities in some sort of holistic and interconnected manner so we can identify a point of reference of a digital footprint at the start of this century. As IS researchers of surveillance and privacy we have to look beyond our discipline in order to frame this research. We argue the issue of surveillance and privacy is a theme running through each of the listed topic areas, suggested by UKAIS, for contribution.

Originality and Significance to Discipline

A growing range of surveillance technologies have been employed by both public and private sectors in the past decade, capitalising on technological advances such as wireless communication and automatic facial recognition / behaviour analysis. The changing political and security landscape following 9/11 has accelerated this trend. This research aims to understand how invasive these visible and invisible technologies have become, what personal data is being captured, and what may be the implications on society. A comparative analysis model of the digital capture exercise may then be used to identify similarities across other nations.

This research project is unique on a number of levels; its critical consideration of the underlying evidence base currently cited in academic and popular literature, its effort to bring the 'garbage studies' of the 1960s and other biographical methods into a digital context and its holistic viewpoint on human interaction with surveillance technologies. The research will make a contribution to the literature by providing a reference dataset that will be fully documented in order to enable the development of comparative 24 hour sousveillance footprints at different locations and different times.

Objectives

- To provide an ethnographic snapshot of individual exposure to surveillance technologies over a 24 hour period
- To scope and define appropriate methodologies for collecting and interpreting individual digital footprints
- To identify and describe the shape of a personal digital footprint
    - Investigate which elements of individual digital footprints are stored by commercial and governmental organisations
    - Identify and catalogue the range of technologies that contribute to and shape the construction of digital footprints
- To review existing research conducted in this topic area (to include academic, governmental literature and other research studies)

Methodology

A multi-methodological approach will be adopted:

- Conduct 2 x 24-hour digital walkthroughs to produce the ethnographic snapshot of individual exposure to surveillance technologies (the field study will take place in March and involve two members of the research team)
- Gather secondary evidence to construct a personal data repository collection
- Critical review of The Surveillance Society Report (2006), the ICO's Surveillance Society (2010), the House of Commons Constitution Committee Report: Surveillance: Citizens and the State (2009).
- Gap analysis investigating developments in technology, policy, law and practice since the publication of the SSN report in 2006.