



# Engaging contemporary consumer surveillance practices: A biblical perspective

Considers how a surveillance society shapes us as human beings. Fear and suspicion replaces trust and deep interpersonal relationships. Our sense of belonging and self-identity is undermined.



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A few years ago after a conference in London, I had the opportunity to explore the city a bit. One of my first stops was at St Paul's Cathedral and I distinctly remember noticing, as I entered the sanctuary and looked up, the presence of two dome enclosed surveillance cameras against the backdrop of the ornate cathedral. It was an indelible image. I was keenly aware then as a Canadian surveillance researcher and tourist that I was in one of the most surveilled countries in the world.<sup>1</sup> Being caught on camera was almost inescapable in that city, yet in the juxtaposition of these particular cameras against the backdrop this cathedral, I thought to myself how this simple pairing spoke volumes about our experiences of surveillance. Here, in the presence of a sanctuary set apart for the worship of the omniscient God, was the exemplar of human attempts at technological omniscience.

### The 'informatization of everyday life'

I am less concerned about the reasons for these particular cameras in this particular space – no doubt they are less invasive than other means of surveillance in such an iconic place – but I do wonder how much can really be 'seen' through the efforts of contemporary surveillance. More importantly, I wonder about the effects such mechanisms of surveillance may have on how we see ourselves; how our own identity is moulded and transformed in light of the potential for continual observation. What brought me to London those years ago was my continuing research on consumer surveillance practices, and in specific the use of those thin pieces of plastic so many of us carry in our wallets

and on our key rings called 'loyalty cards'. For me, more than the use of CCTV cameras, these cards serve to symbolise the implications for the contemporary surveillance we experience on a daily basis. They give us a better glimpse into the 'informatization of everyday life', in which the details of our lives are digitally captured, gathered together, analysed and sorted for a variety of purposes. This informatization of everyday life is at the heart of contemporary surveillance, which seeks to know and understand people's daily practices in order to both define those outside the norm – and deem them as some form of 'risk' – and provide a stable picture of those within the norm, and thereby allowing government agencies, corporations, health-care providers and more to provide those surveilled with services, opportunities and products that 'fit' their lives.

The increased importance of digitising even the most mundane activities of our daily lives is occurring in the context of an increasingly consumer-oriented society. Almost everything has been made into a commodity – if we are not buying the right product, then we are busy finding the right lifestyle, diet, health regime, therapy, and even, in the case of many Christians, the 'right' church that best suits us. We actively renovate our homes, our wardrobes, and even our own perspectives on the world with a myriad of do-it-yourself shows and self-help books to assist us. These are intended to give us ways to better our lives and allow us to better express ourselves, and companies have helped to foster this orientation as well as shifted their practices toward this orientation. The current mantra of marketing practice is about developing a relationship with consumers to in

some sense develop an idyllic 'corner store' knowledge of the customer's needs and desires. They seek to know us, as one loyalty program manager I interviewed for my own research put it, so that a company is 'a little bit like their best friend that seems to know everything that they do – but in the best friend kind of feel. And that it is a trusting ... "they really help me out" type of relationship'.

Given the sophisticated range and sheer volume of consumers, data gathering and analysis is seen as the only means to create this relational feel. What companies do, from supermarkets to financial institutions to telecoms, in practices replicated in government, education and health-care agencies, is classify people into distinctive sets of categories. Tesco, the UK's largest retailer, for instance, relies on terabytes of data derived from its clubcard to know, understand and move customer behaviour through special offers, advertisements, discounts, amongst other means, and more. These Tesco consumers are clustered together with people at similar life stages, income levels, neighbourhoods, ethnic backgrounds, shopping histories, and more. It is a process replicated in almost every corporation and increasingly a part of all governmental and quasi-governmental practices. These organisations can add to their own data information from a number of data brokerage companies that have already described different clusters of consumers/citizens/constituents with labels such as 'Burdened Optimists', or 'City Adventurers', or 'Parochial Villagers'. For marketers, these labels and their connected descriptions are used to help define and understand likely consumption patterns, enabling companies to meet (and produce) their customers' needs – whether 'real' or 'perceived'.

Marketing that relies on such clustering techniques is subtle. It hints at what we might need, at what we may be like, at what we may want based on an algorithmic analysis of a number of socio-economic variables. It allows certain calls to 'jump ahead' in the call centre queue based on how valuable the company has categorised that customer or the area they are calling from. People are targeted with advertisements based on meaningful assumptions about them in a process that sorts these persons into a myriad of categories to which the company decides they belong. This is replicated by governmental and quasi-governmental agencies interested in identifying voting patterns, service needs, social program usage and more. These are forms of social sorting that are at the heart of contemporary surveillance.

### Responding to surveillance

Practices of social sorting are not something new, and examples abound even biblically. From the Roman census that brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem to the phrase of Nathanael – 'Can anything good come from Nazareth?' (Jn 1.46) – the clustering of people with particular associations, often related to place or family, has been a regular social practice. We do this consciously

and unconsciously on a daily basis, and the use of categories enables us to proceed with our daily lives.<sup>2</sup> Thanks to digital technologies the speed, frequency and automation of this sorting has changed significantly in recent years. And we seem oblivious to what is happening, unaware of the frequency our personal information is being processed by different agencies and corporations, and seem to want to ignore the effects and implications of these practices.

How then do we begin to reconcile this increased social sorting with a biblical faith? What makes this an issue that our faith equips and motivates us to engage with? How do we evaluate practices of contemporary surveillance that seek to process and sort people into economically, socially, medically and criminally meaningful and useful categories with a God that, as Psalm 139 reminds us, searches and knows our inmost thoughts? What does it mean to engage with surveillance practices as 'Christians' in a context in

**the informatization of everyday life is at the heart of contemporary surveillance, which seeks to know and understand people's daily practices**

which 'Christian' has become simply another category of belonging that symbolises religious preference on a census, likely voting patterns, and a propensity to buy religious greeting cards and attend Christian concerts?

In large measure, people, Christians included, respond to surveillance in three ways: they either wholeheartedly embrace surveillance techniques, actively reject them, or remain apathetic. Most significantly, some Christians who reject these technologies view surveillance in light of apocalyptic visions in which the anti-Christ uses many of these technologies for his own gain. Despite their motivation, sometimes these concerns are not without good cause, however, more often than not these are predicated on fear rather than reasoned, measured and faithful understandings of technological capabilities and use.<sup>3</sup> Yet there are, from my perspective, at least two interrelated issues connected with the contemporary practices of surveillance and, more importantly, how these affect how we understand ourselves and our neighbours, that make critical Christian perspectives and engagement(s) necessary.

#### 1. Relationships

The surveillance techniques and technologies that we have become so reliant upon are problematic in terms of relationships. As Christians that seek to follow a God that became incarnate, the importance of relationships should be clear: God did not rely on the intermediaries of the prophets and the law but chose himself to dwell in and among us that we might be in relation with him. We are to replicate this indwelling nature in all of our relationships, in our neighbourhoods and workplaces and churches, so that people might know we are Christ's

### Notes

1. For a visual depiction of 'surveillance societies', see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk/6108496.stm>.

2. See Eviatar Zerubavel's book *The Fine Line: Making Distinctions in Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) for some excellent illustrations of this.

3. See K Albrecht *Spychips Threat: Why Christians Should Resist RFID and Electronic Surveillance* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Current, 2006).

4. This is often used as a critique of academics and intellectuals such as those in my own discipline of sociology, in which engagement is merely made up of critique from afar. All too often, this is replicated in daily life through a detachment from the co-presence of others and a focus on portable electronic devices. For more on the latter issue, see Zygmunt Bauman's book *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi* (Cambridge: Polity Press,

disciples (Jn 13.35). All too often technologies of surveillance occur at a distance and either augment or replace relationships. This is not to say that surveillance does this in all cases, rather the potential for trust and the possibilities of deep interpersonal relationships become more difficult the more reliant we are upon tools and techniques that produce what might be called 'society at a distance'.<sup>4</sup> This may be through technologies that indicate 'at-risk children', 'profitable consumers' and daily updates from 'friends', but surveillance done by governments, companies, and through social networking sites serve to mediate our lives in ways that are both beneficial and detrimental. We need to be critically engaged in evaluating the times and moments in which we rely on automated or technologically augmented tools to engage others and the unintended consequences of those practices. The taken-for-granted use of technology often alters our relationships in ways we do not expect.

through consumer surveillance practices focused on profitability. We must call into question long-standing assumptions of risk and criminality that are simply reinforced and reiterated by new forms of surveillance. Moreover, we must act upon the knowledge and possibilities that other forms of surveillance allow, such as those from national statistic bureaus that are indicative of the marginalised and disadvantaged we are called to serve. We are to give voice to the voiceless, to those whose voices are not heard, so that we might demonstrate and reveal the true 'belonging' of all people to their creator.

## Conclusion

As co-labourers with Christ that seek to bring his Kingdom to earth, to see his will be done, the necessity of being in relation with one another and of providing a sense of belonging for all is at the heart of our mission. We must critically engage with all the surveillance technologies and practices of social sorting, whether they are beneficial or not. In the process, perhaps we can truly begin to see and be seen with the eyes of the one who has created us and calls us by name, without the trappings and benefits of categories and clusters, but instead as children that belong to him and with whom he seeks to be in relation.

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2004). For a critique on these academic practices, see Michael Burawoy's work on 'Public Sociology'.

5. For more on this issue, see Richard Jenkins article 'Categorization: Identity, Social Process and Epistemology', *Current Sociology* 48/3 (2000), pp. 7–25.

6. For more about issues of inclusion and exclusion and its relationship with identity from a Christian perspective, see Miroslav Volf's *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon 1996).

## 2. Belonging

The other important and interrelated issue that contemporary surveillance practices raises is about belonging. Who we are and what we are about is inherently related to our relationships and our sense of belonging within those relationships. It is why the writer of Hebrews made a point of reminding early followers of Christ not to give up the habit of meeting together. In our current context, while we have available (particularly in affluent Western cultures) an abundance of choice with regards to communities, groups, churches, neighbourhoods to which we may belong, the social sorting of surveillance practices predetermine a number of these for us. Surveillance technologies now both create and facilitate the sorting of persons into various groups, clusters and categories at an unprecedented rate, which may or may not be accurate.

Whether we are aware of our 'belonging' to these categories or not, they necessarily have effects on our sense of self – our sense of identity – as these become integrated into our daily lives. We begin to experience life differently on the basis of how certain resources, penalties, opportunities, expectations, and more are distributed to us.<sup>5</sup> This occurs through systems and practices of inclusion and exclusion embedded in and made possible through bureaucratic and corporate analyses as well as in and through interpersonal relationships.

As Christians, we must be aware of the problematic nature of forms of exclusion,<sup>6</sup> of practices that underpin socio-economic disparities, all too often reinforced

## Dallas Willard on 'Knowing Christ Today'

One of the greatest Christian influencers of our time, Dallas Willard is an author, international speaker and professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California. If you missed the rare opportunity to hear him speak at the recent Bible Society conference 'Knowing Christ Today' or would like to hear them again you can download the talks for FREE from the Bible Society's website (see the link below).

Based on his latest book *Personal Religion, Public Reality?: Towards a Knowledge of Faith* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2010), which tackles some of the most provocative and vital questions facing the Church today, Dallas' three talks focused on:

- the difference between faith and knowledge, and how knowing what you believe can change your life
- the themes of the Kingdom of God and being apprentices of Jesus
- looking at Christian formation and how we move from being Christians to disciples

You can download the audio files from [biblesociety.org.uk/products/1296/49/dallas\\_willard\\_audio\\_download/](https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/products/1296/49/dallas_willard_audio_download/)