The Implications of Citizen-Surveillance

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Neighbour, Passenger, or Terrorist? Implications for Security Amidst the Growing Use of Citizen-Surveillance

Since 2004, civilians living in the United Kingdom have been targeted by government poster, leaflet and radio campaigns with slogans such as 'If you suspect it, report it', and 'Handyman? Pest Controller? Bomb Maker?',[1] which urge citizens to play an active role in vigilance for potential terrorist activities. Produced by the Metropolitan Police Service, similar campaigns have also appeared in cities across the United States, Canada and Australia, and although government propaganda to promote civilian vigilance against threats is not new,[2] there has been a noticeable growth in the 'intensity of surveillance in Western countries…as a result of September 11.'[3]

The justifications for these surveillance activities are based upon logics of risk and precaution, whereby 'surveillance functions as an early warning system that allows identification of potential terrorists',[4] and therefore, the state authorities are able to disrupt or prevent future attacks. However, the implications and real-life consequences that such widespread participation in counter-terrorism can have on individual freedoms means that there is a requirement to ask critical questions about such campaigns. This essay argues that if security is equated to emancipation, citizen-surveillance campaigns have serious implications for the security of individual citizens, due to the risks of racial profiling, and the ambiguity of 'suspicious' behaviour that these campaigns rely on.

Surveillance of Citizens by Citizens: Better to be Safe than Sorry?

In order to investigate the implications that this form of surveillance can have, it is first necessary to establish what surveillance is, and how citizen-vigilance campaigns are constructed and function as an aspect of counter-terrorism efforts.

Surveillance, in the broadest sense of the term, can be defined as 'the observation, recording and categorization of the information about people, processes and institutions',[5] and is increasingly an action taken by states as a response to the threat of terrorist attacks.[6]   Unlike more widespread forms of surveillance, such as CCTV cameras or biometric passport data, the use of citizen surveillance campaigns appears to be an extension of observation from traditional agents of the state (for example, security service personnel, police officers, or border agency officials) to ordinary citizens, who become 'the eyes and ears of the state.'[7] By following instructions to relay 'suspicious' observations to special counter-terrorist hotlines, or to the nearest public servant, civilians are encouraged to become '*agents* of surveillance',[8] on behalf of government counter-terrorist agencies, but are clearly distinct from the official hotlines or personnel that they are required to report information to. Although the observation, recording, and categorization is enacted by the conscientious individual citizen, the system functions as an aspect of counter-terrorism when the information is passed on to the security services, as 'the MPS [Metropolitan Police Service] will assess all incoming intelligence and decide if, when, and how to act.'[9] Therefore, despite the inclusion of civilian participation, the state is still in control of the surveillance mechanism, and it is tailored to address what the government considers to be the most urgent threat to its survival.

It is within the above structure of this surveillance mechanism that we can identify a state-centric understanding of 'national security', which these campaigns are designed to preserve, and that governments use to justify the

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necessity of such widespread surveillance.

When national security is utilised as a justification for a particular policy choice (such as an increase in the use of surveillance mechanisms), it 'indicates that the policy is designed to promote demands which are ascribed to the nation, rather than to individuals, sub-national groups, or mankind as a whole.'[10] With regards to citizen-surveillance, civilians are reminded that the nation is constantly under threat from potential acts of violence, and as citizens within that nation, they therefore have a duty to take action (reporting 'suspicious' behaviour), in order to protect the nation from such threats.[11] Although precise details of the threat are not included in the campaign material (the public are asked to be vigilant for *anything* which could be utilised by terrorists, who could potentially be *anyon*e), the nature of that the threat is terrorism is made explicitly clear.

The efficacy of such campaigns to adequately reduce the threat of terrorism to national security would be one way of assessing the implications of the recent growth in citizen surveillance.[12] However, the prioritisation that such campaigns place on national security over the demands of individuals or sub-national groups, and the dominance with which the government asserts its necessity to order counter-terrorism in that way means, that there is a need to question how such campaigns impact on alternative or critical conceptions of security. It is with this need in mind that the focus of this essay now turns to Booth's concept of security as 'emancipation', and what implications citizen-surveillance campaigns have for the security of individuals and sub-national groups.

Security, Emancipation, and the Stranger with a Backpack

If citizen-surveillance is examined from an alternative perspective which does not prioritise the demands of the state over competing demands from individuals, it is useful to present a different conception of security. One of the ideas to develop from the Welsh School of Security Studies (which emerged as one of many recent challenges to the dominant notion of the state as the referent object of security within international relations theory)[13] is Booth's argument that true security can only exist when emancipation has been achieved. In this approach,

'emancipation is the freeing of people (as individuals and groups) from those physical and human constraints which stop them carrying out what they would freely choose to do…. Emancipation, not power or order, produces true security.'[14]

Although this argument is aimed at the entire way in which security is theoretically conceptualized, it is an alternative approach to security which can be used to challenge the dominant justifications for growth in citizen-surveillance, which will now be done by presenting the ways in which these campaigns prevent emancipation, and therefore true security, from being achieved.

The first aspect of citizen-surveillance which increases, rather than reduces constraints to the free choices of individuals, applies in particular to those who are deemed to be behaving 'suspiciously' as a result of the broad and unclear notions of what is 'normal' that are espoused by these campaigns. When members of the public are encouraged by the state to be vigilant against potential terrorist activity, they are required to do so by making a distinction in the public sphere of what should be the 'normal' behaviour of others, or use of a space (such as a storage facility, or the river).[15] This is based on the assumption that 'terrorists look and act so transparently that intensified monitoring will single them out for investigation and capture.'[16] However, despite this assumption, Vaughn-Williams highlights that the public vigilance campaigns exhibit a 'lack of clarity about precisely what citizen-detectives should be on the lookout *for…* Rather, the suspicion is generalised and objectless.'[17]

With this space for personal interpretation, and the rhetoric of urgency and danger that these campaigns utilise,[18] citizens are encouraged that it's better to be safe than sorry, and that any suspicion, should be reported just in case. However, this zealousness increases the risk of information being passed on that has been predominantly influenced by dominant stereotypes or profiles of what citizens understand terrorists to look like, or behave, even if it is not expressed explicitly. For example, a citizen could report an individual as acting suspiciously on the underground with a rucksack, but without revealing that they originally became concerned because of the stranger's ethnic appearance, and the perception that this generated for the observer. The results of such profiling can have serious

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consequences for the agency of the individual who has been deemed as the abnormal 'other', as 'by singling out certain classes or individuals for greater scrutiny based on stereotypical attributes of group behaviour they reproduce or reinforce biases against entire categories of people.'[19]

These categories of people can find their ability to live a life free from constraints inhibited by such biases. Through no fault of their own, or any actual connection to terrorist activities, individuals lose their freedom to avoid a discriminatory gaze of strangers, based upon the unfair biases that these campaigns reinforce. This could restrict the ability of an individual or members of a sub-national group to occupy public space (such as siting in a train carriage) without being observed and assessed as potentially suspicious by other passengers who are not members of the same group. For individuals who choose to display certain forms of behaviour or identity in public, surveillance based on citizen perception 'takes away this control from the self, and endeavours to reveal its identity without discussion or reciprocity, thereby being an invasive force that strips the self of its independence and autonomy.'[20] This means that the individual's freedom to travel throughout the public space without having their identity interpreted or discussed in relation to terrorism has been subverted for the sake of a surveillance system, which prioritises national security over the emancipation of individuals.

This lack of emancipation can also affect individuals in more tangibly physical consequences. Larsen and Piché argue that 'it is probable that innocent individuals have been wrongly targeted as a result of this form of public participatory surveillance,'[21] and in the least harmful sense, this could mean the inconvenience of wrongfully being approached by counter-terrorism personnel. However, the fatal shooting of innocent civilian Jean Charles de Menezes by counter-terrorism officers in London in 2005, demonstrates the most dangerous consequence of exhibiting so called 'abnormal' behaviour.[22] In this case, the killing was deemed to have occurred in part due to an interpretation of de Menezes re-boarding a public bus as evidence that he intended to evade surveillance personnel in order to detonate an explosive device on the London Underground.[23] This misinterpretation of his innocuous behaviour and the fact that racial profiling had contributed to his identification by a surveillance operation as suspected failed bomber Hussain Osman,[24] is indicative of the severe risk posed by such normative conceptions of suspicious behaviour, particularly for individuals whose appearance conforms to dominant ideas of what a terrorist would look like.

Citizen surveillance campaigns also have implications for the freedom to live from constraint or fear (if emancipation is equivocal to security) for those who participate in the observation. Despite using language which emphasises the inclusion and widespread participation of civilians for counter-terrorism, citizen agents who participate in the campaigns have minimal control over the agenda and governance of the security that they are supposedly contributing to through their vigilance.[25] In being receptive to the messages of fear and threat, well-meaning individuals can find themselves unwittingly observing and assessing the behaviour of strangers in public or private spaces, without being aware that they are participating in the surveillance of other citizens, even if they do not act on their observations by reporting to the authorities.[26] Booth and Dunne describe this as creating a culture where 'minds occupied by knowledge of terror will closely examine a fellow passenger who looks different, and they will wonder what might be hidden in the backpack on the floor.'[27]

Therefore, public awareness campaigns, as an aspect of counter-terrorism, detrimentally affect the security of individuals within the nation, whether they are doing the watching, or being watched. For the citizen observers, the freedom to choose to participate in a system that provokes fear has been co-opted from them; whilst for those who behave or identify in ways that differ from the norm, the risks of being actively or passively subjected to discrimination are a constraint on their freedom of expression.

By critiquing the urgency and priority of national security that citizen-surveillance campaigns place over individual agency, this essay has not aimed to delegitimise the real risk and fear that governments and citizens have of terrorist attacks. However, by continuing to utilise counter-terrorism strategies which have negative implications for the security of non-state actors, governments are attempting to reduce the risk of terrorism by increasing the possibilities for discrimination, bias, unnecessary fear, and inter-communal suspicion. Therefore, to conclude, the increasing use of citizen-surveillance campaigns by governments has detrimental implications for the security of individuals to be free from the 'physical and human constraints which stop them carrying out what they would freely choose to

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do'.[28]   Unless notions of emancipation and security are critically re-considered in relation to current counter-terrorism policies, the negative effects that such campaigns have on individual agency will continue to foster the society of mutual suspicion as evoked by Booth and Dunne. Whilst the debate within International Relations regarding the true meaning of security continues, there is a growing space for citizen-surveillance to be critically examined as a part of that wider discussion, as an aspect which has tangible and serious every-day consequences for all those residing in the United Kingdom.

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