Future agenda

The future of surveillance: how does digital surveillance fit within a world of increasing transparency?

Satellite dishes at GCHQ's outpost in Cornwall, Southwest England, close to where transatlantic fibre-optic cables come ashore
© Reuters / Kieran Doherty

From the Survey

"Are democracy and capitalism at risk from the proliferation of surveillance and data aggregation? Is privacy a thing of the past? Will big data's big winners become monopolists?"

James Stewart
Chairman of KPMG's Global Infrastructure Practice, a Member of the Global Agenda Council on Infrastructure

From the Survey

"The most significant issue is how to foster new, exciting and mutually beneficial opportunities that take advantage of Big Data while simultaneously allowing people to control some portion of their data flow."

Michael Fertik
Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Reputation.com, and a Member of the Global Agenda Council on the Future of the Internet

Nigel Inkster
Director of The Transnational Threats and Political Risk International Institute for Strategic Studies, and Chair of the Global Agenda Council on Terrorism

Big Data has fundamentally changed our relationship with information and called into question established expectations of privacy. Our personal information and online behaviour has become a commodity to be analysed and marketed to a degree that few users of electronic media appreciate, and with virtually no controls.

As a former intelligence officer I am no stranger to electronic surveillance, but I fully understand that ordinary citizens are uncomfortable with this phenomenon. We now live in a world of Big Data and unlike in the past, the technologies that enable this are almost exclusively in the hands of the private sector.

It should come as no surprise that governments have sought to keep pace with these developments to ensure national security or to pursue national advantage: there are many malevolent actors who use the internet and other electronic media for nefarious purposes including criminality, sabotage and terrorism, and governments need to be able to counter such activities. But they need to do so in ways that command public confidence: there needs to be clarity about the reasons for governments to access Big Data – though not the ways in which they do it – and transparent and verifiable processes for ensuring that such access is not abused. I doubt whether any of my former colleagues in the intelligence community would have a problem with these propositions.

That said, I don't think you can ever perfectly reconcile aspirations for transparency and the need for security. This has to be a pragmatic calculation driven by perceptions of threat and risk; history suggests that most populations will accept some constraints on their freedom in return for feeling safe.

As for the use of electronic media for state-on-state espionage, this is simply a function of the human condition and is unlikely to ever change. States that feel disadvantaged will just have to adopt better communications security – and perhaps invest more in their own intelligence capabilities.

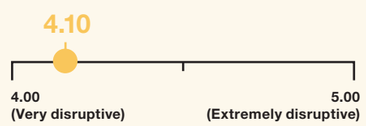
Concerns about security and privacy should not obscure the very real benefits the internet has brought about. And for all the current talk of threat and risk, we should bear in mind that so far nothing too bad has happened in the cyber domain. But the pace of development has taken us all by surprise and we need to start thinking through the implications of where we now find ourselves in a more systematic – and democratic – way ■

Which stakeholders need to be most aware of digital surveillance?

Stakeholder awareness	Digital surveillance
Governments	100%
Business	96%
IOs	74%
NGOs	67%
Academia	63%

Source: Survey on the Global Agenda 2013

How disruptive do you believe digital surveillance will be during the next 18 months?



1.00 = Not disruptive at all **2.00 =** Not very disruptive
3.00 = Somewhat disruptive
4.00 = Very disruptive **5.00 =** Extremely disruptive

Source: Survey on the Global Agenda 2013

More people become aware of digital surveillance

78% of respondents expect digital surveillance to become more widely perceived within the next year

Source: Survey on the Global Agenda 2013