When Google Street View came to Canada’s capital, Ottawa, one journalist compared the new all-seeing view of the world with the ‘eye of God’.1 Street View is a system that enhances Google Maps with photos that tilt pan and zoom at the user’s whim. We already live in a surveillance society, noted the writer, and this takes constant monitoring one stage further.2

It is interesting, to say the least, that twenty-first century technological systems that have huge surveillance capacities may be said to have God-like features. In what follows, I suggest that while the multi-sensory forms of contemporary surveillance do in one sense parallel some elements of divine ‘watchfulness’, in another sense they do anything but. In order to reach that conclusion, however, we have to step back and consider how we have created the kinds of surveillance society that characterise today’s world. Those developments have followed some specific paths, but, at the same time, they are not inevitable or pre-determined. Surveillance could be like God’s eye in some quite different ways.

Surveillance trends

In what follows, I shall use ‘God’s eye’ loosely, to refer to other senses as well as the visual. In the surveillance sphere we ‘see’ the details of people’s lives by many means, that are often quite mundane. Names and addresses are basic, as are gender and age, and other bits of information that can also be gleaned from public sources such as house and car ownership, educational background and place of employment. The really mundane snippets of information include what toothpaste we buy and how often.

Do not imagine that these trivial bits of data are as insignificant as they seem. Your loyalty card at the supermarket will record data that helps form a profile of your spending patterns. Assumptions may be made about you from this.3 Software, statistics and psychometric analysis may be used to judge your character. Processing these data represents multi-million pound industries of database marketers and huge companies called data brokers, such as Choicepoint or Experian, who provide credit checks.

But not only might you find yourself unable to obtain credit or insurance because the data about you – whether correct, updated, in context or not – suggest you are an unreliable customer. The police or security agencies may also factor such information into their attempts to gauge who might be likely to be dishonest or even violent. Again, in Canada, the RCMP use information from data brokers in trying to discover who may be a security risk. The practice is even more widespread in the USA. In the UK, too, Experian’s services are used by all 52 police forces for data collection, name and address verification, tracing individuals and so on.

In other words, each time we assume that some minor recorded event or exchange – using a credit card, checking a website, using a mobile phone – is trivial, we contribute to the unchecked growth of the surveillance society. Of course, the large-scale systems are there, run by commercial enterprises, government departments and police and security agencies, and they have increasingly comprehensive coverage of our daily lives. But it is not a unified, integrated system. It is primarily a product of the so-called information society and our everyday

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**David Lyon**

Canadian sociologist Dr David Lyon is the Director of the Queen’s Surveillance Project (Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario) a multidisciplinary, internationally collaborative research program that is at the forefront of surveillance studies in the world.
while many aspects of surveillance are innocuous if not beneficial, it is surprising how many people think that surveillance is basically benign if not socially positive. In this case, people are aware of surveillance and either welcome it or accept it as an unavoidable fact of life. The more positive view is the sense that somehow surveillance cameras, for example, ‘make them feel safer’. The evidence for such hopes is thin to say the least. Another aspect of credulity is the comment, ‘if you have nothing to hide you have nothing to fear’, which, after the discussion of data brokers, needs no further comment.

3. Compliance – Those who are complacent about their personal data or credulous about the positive benefits of all surveillance are also likely to comply with the growing surveillance demands. Even though only 25 years ago we would hardly ever have been asked to ‘show ID’, for example, today we take for granted that in many circumstances and locations we have to fish out a plastic card to prove we are who we say we are or to show that we are eligible for benefits, access or services. Of course, there may well be real benefits to us personally, whether actual rewards or saved time (e.g. using fast-track cards in an airport). Most of the time, though, we don’t think twice about the presence of cameras, or whether our transit cards (such as Oyster on the London Underground) might be used by the police. We simply comply.

Seeing the secular

Now we zoom in on some specific issues that get to the heart of the controversial idea of surveillance as ‘God’s eye’, starting with the work of the eighteenth-century secularist social reformer Jeremy Bentham. Into a maelstrom of argument about English prisons utilitarian Bentham proposed an architectural system depending on surveillance or as he called it, ‘inspection’. He called his design the ‘Panoptican’. In this ‘all seeing place’, prisoners would be fully and constantly visible to an invisible inspector, without the inmates being able to tell whether they were being watched. Bentham believed that such a prison would solve several problems simultaneously. Indeed, as well as producing docile prisoners, it would also enable prisons to turn a profit from their labour and, when applied in other areas such as factories or schools, could have further utopian effects.

Interestingly, against the backdrop of very religiously based prison reform proposals (mainly from Quakers and evangelicals) Bentham couched his plans in the context of a kind of ‘secular omniscience’, prefacing the design with a quote from Psalm 139: ‘Thou art about my path, and about my bed; and spiest out all my ways’. Bentham’s ‘panoptic’ system was thus offered as an alternative way of achieving social order that simply sidestepped the need for the ‘eye’ to be God’s. But, of course, his design also rested on the kind of rational abstract knowledge prized by the Enlightenment thinkers. This kind of knowing sought to impose its own order, its own rationality, determining that which could be known.

Actually, the whole psalm could be re-read in the twenty-first century in just this way, only now the Enlightenment ‘way of knowing’ has been reinforced by twentieth-century developments in science and technology. Surveillance today, with its voracious appetite for more and more data, aims at comprehensive coverage. It aims to suck in all details just in case they prove useful. But it is also detailed, also in ways apparently hinted at in the psalm. It ‘discerns’ (vv. 2–5) as a kind of window into the soul. Going further, the Hebrew word ‘searches’ suggests ‘winnowing’, a sifting and sorting into categories, again characteristic of today’s surveillance. It ‘knows minds’ as behavioural observation techniques in airports claim to do, and ‘surrounds’ the object of vision, like the aspirations of ‘ubiquitous computing’.

Thus, there really seems to be nowhere to hide (vv. 7–12). Even death does not hinder this vision (is this the virtual immortality of dead persons whose Facebook pages are still maintained?). Nor does distance or darkness. The ‘wings of the morning’ suggests a global reach for this vision, achieved today by international communications networks. And the shadow of night is light if one uses infra-red lenses. In verses 13–18 time as well as space is surveilled; from the womb a life-map is available (now upgraded with the comprehensive dataveillance of linked databases that miss no detail. And this sort of updated analysis could continue, only extending Bentham’s imagination by means of software architectures rather than the original bricks-and-mortar prison plan.

This analysis also raises further questions. It is certainly stimulating and instructive to explore the ways that surveillance based on aspects of Enlightenment vision can be augmented by information technologies. This helps us to focus on what we think about these forms.
of surveillance, and on what can be said, evaluatively, about such developments. However, it is equally important to stand back and ask, not just what we can say about surveillance, but what this surveillance says about us. What sort of social, cultural and political world have we moderns made, that depends so heavily on surveillance? Why do we so avidly seek comprehensive, abstract data and to break down barriers created by time and space? And why do we rely on systems that foster fear and spread suspicion? What do our tools tell us about our deeper attitudes and hopes?

Positioning the post-secular

The key problem with Bentham’s reading of Psalm 139 (as indeed of latter-day readings that follow the same track) is that it does violence to the text. Take off the ‘Enlightened’ blinkers and one sees a song full of very personal references in which omniscience is active, escape-thoughts ambivalent (like a child running from a parent) and the watching God turns out also to be intimately involved in other details of being human. The psalmist in turn responds not with abject fear, but rather gratitude, wonder, reassurance. So much so that the psalmist invites further scrutiny, of thoughts, fears, wanderings and company for the journey.

The psalmist discovers what it is to be known by God and this involves both a healthy respect for the one who can as it were see right through human beings, and also a sense of relief that someone has noticed and is aware of the situations of life with all their uncertainties. This is not merely cool, scientific knowledge that purports to be detached and technologically clinical. Rather, it’s a knowing that engages the person in a whole way and demands to be thought of as ‘love’; what Bernard Lonergan calls an ‘epistemology of love’. As NT Wright says, ‘Love is the deepest mode of knowing, because it is love that, while completely engaging with reality other than itself, affirms and celebrates that other-than-self. This is not merely cool, scientific knowledge that purports to be detached and technologically clinical. Rather, it’s a knowing that engages the person in a whole way and demands to be thought of as ‘love’; what Bernard Lonergan calls an ‘epistemology of love’. As NT Wright says, ‘Love is the deepest mode of knowing, because it is love that, while completely engaging with reality other than itself, affirms and celebrates that other-than-self.

Bentham left no space for such knowing and the technological mediation of surveillance tends to shut it out even more firmly. But what happens when this far fuller sense of seeing or knowing comes into play? The following ‘3Rs’ connect the critique of Bentham’s omniscience with proposals for surveillance today.

1. Not so much ‘seeing’ as ‘ retrieval’. Much contemporary surveillance is based on a hermeneutic of suspicion that does not trust the person surveilled to be truthful. The psalm’s knowledge is willing to retrieve and build on trust, while at the same time recognising finitude and proneness to error. Rather than merely making an ‘object’ of what is seen, it is also self-aware. While this is true of the divine ‘seeing’ it is also so, in slightly different ways, of human surveillance. Given the human proneness to deceive and distort, some suspicion is warranted in surveillance systems. But if it is to be anything like ‘God’s eye’ in Psalm 139, it has to be tempered by trust.

2. Seen by God’s eye

The idea that today’s surveillance is like ‘God’s eye in the sky’ tells us how little ‘God’s eye’ is understood in contemporary culture. At the same time, it reveals much about what we rely on from day-to-day. The caricature of God’s all-knowing gaze reflects more the priorities of the Enlightenment to discover accurate, exhaustive and perhaps hidden information using rational methods. In themselves, these ideals are not misguided, just hopelessly lopsided and incomplete. What God knows, according to the psalm quoted by Bentham, is relational and embodied. While that vision has aspects of moral concern (not just moral control, which is what much technological surveillance comes down to) it is also shaped by personal care in a context of mutual trust.

How does this affect our understanding of and response to contemporary surveillance? For one thing, this analysis puts today’s surveillance in context and in perspective. It is a product of the Enlightenment, reinforced by computing and information technologies. Its techniques tend to be abstract, disembodied and distrustful. It thus has its uses, but they are likely to be limited, and cry out for superior alternatives that involve more human interaction, more attention to embodiment and trust. Allowed to develop according to the desires of government departments, technology developers or marketing corporations surveillance may well resemble the God’s eye of popular imagination; myopic and sometimes malign.

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CCTV is an ‘utter fiasco’. Less than 3 per cent of street robberies are solved using CCTV, and as for preventing anything, dream on.

5. The inspector was enclosed by a central tower, behind blinds, and prisoners in their back-lit cells were fanned out in a semi-circle in front of him.


8. Ibid.

9. See, for example, N Katherine Hayles, How We Became Posthuman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).