



Information Commissioner's Office
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Press Release

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Waking up to a surveillance society

The Information Commissioner, Richard Thomas, is today launching a public debate on the implications of living in a surveillance society. The Information Commissioner's Office is hosting the 28th International Data Protection and Privacy Commissioners' Conference, which starts today in London, where Richard Thomas will warn that we are waking up to a surveillance society.

Today also marks the publication of ['A Surveillance Society'](#) - a detailed report which has been specially commissioned for the conference. It looks at surveillance in 2006 and projects forward ten years to 2016. It describes a surveillance society as one where technology is extensively and routinely used to track and record our activities and movements. This includes systematic tracking and recording of travel and use of public services, automated use of CCTV, analysis of buying habits and financial transactions, and the work-place monitoring of telephone calls, email and internet use. This can often be in ways which are invisible or not obvious to ordinary individuals as they are watched and monitored, and the report shows how pervasive surveillance looks set to accelerate in the years to come.

Richard Thomas said: "Two years ago I warned that we were in danger of sleepwalking into a surveillance society. Today I fear that we are in fact waking up to a surveillance society that is already all around us. Surveillance activities can be well-intentioned and bring benefits. They may be necessary or desirable - for example to fight terrorism and serious crime, to improve entitlement and access to public and private services, and to improve healthcare. But unseen, uncontrolled or excessive surveillance can foster a climate of suspicion and undermine trust.

“As ever-more information is collected, shared and used, it intrudes into our private space and leads to decisions which directly influence people’s lives. Mistakes can also easily be made with serious consequences – false matches and other cases of mistaken identity, inaccurate facts or inferences, suspicions taken as reality, and breaches of security. I am keen to start a debate about where the lines should be drawn. What is acceptable and what is not?”

David Murakami Wood, from the Surveillance Studies Network which prepared the conference report, said: “Surveillance is not a malign plot hatched by evil powers to control the population. But the surveillance society has come about almost without us realising. With technologies that are large-scale, taken for granted and often invisible, surveillance is increasingly everywhere. We describe techniques such as automatic classification and risk-based profiling as “social sorting” which can create real problems for individuals - social exclusion, discrimination and a negative impact on their life chances.”

The report provides glimpses of life in a surveillance society in 2016, including how:

- Shoppers will be scanned as they enter stores, their clothes recognised through unique RFID tags embedded in them. This will be matched with loyalty card data to affect the way they are treated as they do their shopping, with some given preferential treatment over others
- Cars linked to global satellite navigation systems which will provide the quickest route to avoid current congestion, automatically debit the mileage charge from bank accounts and allow police to monitor the speed of all cars and to track selected cars more closely
- Employees will be subject to biometric and psychometric tests plus lifestyle profiles with diagnostic health tests common place. Jobs are refused to those who are seen as a health risk or don’t submit to the tests. Staff benefit packages are drawn up depending upon any perceived future health problems that may affect their productivity
- Schools will introduce card systems to allow parents to monitor what their children eat, their attendance, record of achievement and drug test results

- Facial recognition systems will be used to monitor our movements using tiny cameras embedded in lampposts and in walls, with “friendly flying eyes in the sky” (unmanned aerial vehicles) keeping an eye on us from above
- Older people will feel more isolated as sensors and cameras in their home provide reassurance to their families who know they are safe therefore pay fewer family visits
- Prosperous individuals will start to use personal information management services to monitor their ‘data shadow’ to make sure they are not disadvantaged by any of the vast quantities of information held about them being wrong or out of date. Others without the resources do this will be forced to stand on the other side of a new ‘digital divide’.

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If you need more information, please contact the Information Commissioner’s press office on 020 7025 7580 or visit the website at: www.ico.gov.uk

Notes to Editors

1. The Information Commissioner promotes public access to official information and protects personal information. The ICO is an independent body with specific responsibilities set out in the Data Protection Act 1998, the Freedom of Information Act 2000, Environmental Information Regulations 2004 and Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations 2003.
2. At the two day conference in London, starting on Thursday 2 November, delegates will address the implications of increasing surveillance and its impact on people’s everyday lives. <http://www.privacyconference2006.co.uk/>

Speakers include:

- Helena Kennedy QC, human rights lawyer
 - Shami Chakrabarti, Director of Liberty
 - Sir Stephen Lander, Chairman of SOCA and former Director-General of MI5
 - Ian Watmore, Permanent Secretary at the Cabinet Office leading the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit
 - John Peace, Chairman of Experian plc, which provides credit reference and other information services in many countries around the world.
3. For more information about the Information Commissioner’s Office subscribe to our e-newsletter at www.ico.gov.uk. The [‘A Surveillance Society’](#) report will be available on this website on 2 November.