



“A Surveillance Society”¹ - Keeping track of people in a mobile world

Ideas for leading a Conversation

For general guidance in running these sessions see
'Planning a Conversation' also available at www.agoraspace.org

Background

We are in the midst of great social change. People now move across the entire world with relative ease and have access to enormously powerful information systems. Yet human beings learnt their relational skills in relatively small communities. In such traditional societies everyone knew each other. There was a strong sense of belonging and powerful means of dealing with those who offended against the system. In today's world, many of those we meet are complete strangers. Much of our business is conducted between people who scarcely know each other. At one level modern society is a place of enormous creative potential. At another it is prey to a whole range of new crimes. Modern rule breakers include illegal immigrants, terrorists, internet fraudsters and money launderers.

Every society is dependent on most of its people going along with its co-operative systems most of the time, but even if the majority are trustworthy, there will always be some who abuse the system for their own ends. Public confidence is dependent on the belief that a good proportion of these will be caught and suitably dealt with. This depends on being able to keep track of people adequately such that policing and the law can be effective.

At the same time if tracking systems and policing are overdone, then the whole society can feel oppressed. A 'police state' is a frightening place. Overall a culture can be said to hold a balance between the proper creative freedoms of individuals and the need for collective working together and the disciplines that go with that.

Identity cards are one of several potential tools that our government might employ to keep track of people. All such changes should be examined in terms of what they will do to the balance between individual freedom and corporate responsibilities. Will they simply help us bring crooks to account or might they be abused by government in some way and generate a culture where we all feel continually under surveillance?

¹ These materials are produced by Project Agora, a company limited by guarantee, which is dedicated to creating new spaces in society for the highest possible quality of public conversation, the building of realistic trust and the seeking of vision. Contact Agora at www.agoraspace.org or email enquiries@agoraspace.org

Starter questions for small group discussion

1. **You come across someone doing something that is clearly wrong. What do you do? Tell some examples of how you have reacted and how it left you feeling.**
2. **Have you ever become really unpopular in a group of people? How did you deal with it?**
3. **How would you feel about carrying an identity card?**

One way through the conversation

Do not feel tied to this. The resource section offers several other approaches.

Begin the evening with Question One. You come across someone doing something that is clearly wrong. What do you do? Tell some stories of how you have reacted and how it left you feeling.

Discuss this in small groups and then let the facilitator collect examples. It is likely that anti-social behaviour of young people will feature and people will have felt frustrated and impotent at their lack of resource to adequately deal with the situation. They may have ended up being bad-mouthed and having achieved little. One key issue may be that adults and young people no longer know each other, parents no longer support one another in matters of discipline etc, so the only recourse is to formal legal structures. One issue here is being able to get the names of people and knowing where they live. Let this discussion simply open up some issues about modern society, without an attempt at answering them.

Brainstorm a list on a flip chart (or similar) of ways that technology is giving us new opportunities to keep track of people. One way to do this is to take an imaginary day, all the things that people do, and where they are leaving some form of data trail.

It is likely to include

CCTV

Computerisation of records

Speed cameras

Loyalty cards

Computer hard discs

Mobile phone tracking

Telephone tapping

Bank/ card transactions

Email

(see resources section for more info on some of these)

Begin a conversation about how people feel about these. Notice that there are forms of tracking that we generally accept, like car number plates, that allow a necessary accountability. And there are some like speed cameras, which we might resent at one level, but which are part of a generally accepted discipline. What is clear is that

modern technology is providing all sorts of new opportunities for tracking and the fear is that they will be misused, if not now, at some time in the future.

Yet at the same time there are many new frauds and scams that need effective regulation. These concern major international issues like people trafficking and money laundering, together with a host of abuses of web technology. (see resources for examples) The question is how to manage these without damaging the proper creative freedoms of the individual.

Go to Question Two. Have you ever become really unpopular in a group of people? How did you deal with it?

Collect examples from this small group discussion. It is likely to reveal how unjust and vicious groups of people can be to each other. What occurs with small groups is also very possible at a state level. There will be those who fall out of favour in a nation. The big question then is how the systems deal with that. Most people would affirm the detection and trial etc of people involved in criminal acts, but the big questions arise about those who criticise the state itself. How does the society uphold its order while allowing proper challenge from those who feel marginalised or unjustly treated? History shows us how often those who protest and challenge have been cast as anarchists or heretics and then burnt at the stake or systematically 'disappeared'.

Many of these means of tracking people may feel okay in a democratic society where all sorts of regulations guard against their abuse, protect privacy etc. (See www.liberty-human-rights for an example of an organisation that is actively watching over these issues in the UK.) But the real problems arise if government itself becomes corrupt. A society becomes *dependent* upon the systems that co-ordinate its life. We now need computers, emails and much of the rest of the paraphernalia of modernity. This means that we would find it very difficult to unwind these things if the state began to abuse them'. A key issue is identity cards.

Go to Question Three. How would you feel about carrying an identity card?

Small groups may diverge between those who don't see a problem – probably the majority if the government's focus groups are to go by – and those who have some deep concerns about this. You might illustrate this essential tension as follows:

Clearly identity cards might provide considerable convenience in today's world and in one way are no different to the passport, driving licence and utility bills etc that we now have to produce at every verse end in order to do anything. The difference with an identity card is that it may provide a more **integrated** source of information about us making it easier for people to obtain all sorts of details about us. This would give the identity card a unique power among systems of tracking. And it means that the debate about civil liberties may hinge not so much on whether or not to have a card, but how the card works and what sort of information can be accessed through it. After 9/11 the US government systematically rounded up Muslims. Many were imprisoned without charge for considerable periods of time. (See Amnesty report at <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGAMR510452002>) An identity card might provide a government with the power to track all sorts of groups of people. Can we be confident that they would only use this for proper and legitimate purposes?

Reflection: This conversation is not intended to provide easy answers to these questions. It probably is necessary to have new methods of keeping track of people

in a mobile society such as ours. Yet the potential abuses are also very clear. Perhaps one central issue has to do with the quality of relationships between people today. Revisiting Question One might reveal that when we move in a world of strangers, there can be little subtlety in the relationship. If children and adults are alienated from each other, there can be little room for a gentle warning, or the word with a parent, it is either all or nothing. Total frustration or the police and law. New technologies are a blunt instrument for tracking people and they may make life simply feel harsher as they tend towards formal relationships with the fine through the post or the tangle with bureaucracy and we lose any personal subtlety in our dealings with one another.

Resources

There are a great variety of ways that a conversation like this can actually be handled. Here are some resources that may inspire other approaches, offer different tacks to go on and incorporate different perspectives.

The need to prove identity

Given the ease with which fraud can be committed, an increasing number of institutions are now requiring quite burdensome proofs of identity.

For example:

Renting a mobile phone – a mobile phone company takes a risk on you, lending you equipment against the promise of payment on a monthly basis. To protect against people giving fraudulent names they require everyone to provide two utility bills with your home address on as proof of identity.

Use this example to elicit a range of situations from people when they have had to prove their identity. Would it be easier just to carry an identity card?

How many passwords and PIN numbers do you have? Does it get confusing at times to remember which set of numbers and names you are using for what? It is all evidence of the great need to prove identity in a mobile world.

Modern frauds and scams

Human beings have developed a baffling variety of confidence tricks, whereby unscrupulous people draw you into a scheme, promising to fulfil your dreams and sometimes working on your genuine concerns, but finally doing a bunk and disappearing with your money. For a load of examples see www.fraudsandscams.com

One particularly common fraud over the internet has been dubbed the Nigerian scam, whereby a person receives an email that claims to offer them serious money coming from a government contract, or a will, or whatever, and asks for a phone number to make the arrangement. Telephone contact may then request bank account details and payment of 'transfer fees' etc. Once these fees are paid the contact disappears without trace. For details see <http://home.rica.net/alphae/419coal>

Virtual communities

Keeping track of people in geographically related communities is hard enough, but the web offers real time interaction over vast distances and with the potential for all sorts of pretence in terms of identity. Virtual communities have struggled with this. People often 'play' another character, even a person of another gender or age. They may use abusive language and become embroiled in hate-filled discussion. At the same time others may make powerful and meaningful friendships. The web is proving an enormous resource for meeting old friends, co-ordinating political protest and making intimate relationships. The difficulty is how to appropriately discipline its darker side.

MSN recently closed down its chat rooms after a number of high profile cases in which older men had pretended to a teenage identity in order to develop a friendship with a child. After appropriate 'grooming' behaviour, the paedophiles then attempted to meet with their targets. MSN felt that their only option was to close down the chat rooms. Others argued that this would drive these relationships to an even more personal level, where those who had already met in a chat room would swap email addresses in order to keep in touch. (Source Independent 24th Sept 2003)

Tracking Mobile phones

Many may not be aware that companies are now setting up to track people through their mobile phones.

For as little as £5 per month, companies are offering to locate the owner of a phone. The system works as long as the phone is switched on and works by simple triangulation from mobile phone masts. This means that parents can keep track of where their children are, companies can follow the movements of employees, even a suspicious wife could keep an eye on the comings and goings of her husband! Safeguards are being carefully built into this new technology. The tracked person must give their consent and will be regularly informed of their being monitored. Anyone asking to track a child's phone must prove they are the legal guardian. Subscribers have to be over 18, provide a verifiable address etc. But others are worried about loopholes in this regulation or its use by security services.
(Source Sunday Times Oct 19th 2003)

Traffic as an analogy

We use number plates, and much else besides, to keep track of people on the road. Here is an anonymous environment if ever there was one. Most people that we pass on the road we don't know. So how do we keep track of offenders? We have a system of number plates, coupled with driving licences. The number plate is the first handle of identification that we have on one who offends. We might feel very vulnerable on the road without such a system.

Discuss people's response to this email received 27th Oct 2003. It read:

Subject: Drivers Beware

Those new electronic signs on the M4 were switched on this Tuesday. The bad news is that they are rigged with the SPECS speed cameras.

SPECS is a computer-camera based system. As you go past the sign a digital camera reads your number plate. When you go past the next sign your number plate is read again. The computer 'knows' how far apart the signs are so it can work out your average speed between the two, or three or four.

The system is fully automatic and will issue a ticket without any form of human intervention. It does this for every single vehicle that passes. You will not know you've been caught as the cameras don't flash.

They work 24/7, 365 days a year, and theoretically, there's absolutely no limit on the number of tickets that the system can issue.

The whole section of the M4 between Theale (J12) and Membury Services (between 14 and 15) is wired, both ways. The system is set to trigger a ticket at 78 mph. Radar detectors will be of no use as SPECS is entirely passive, there is no radar or laser beam to detect.

Be warned and spread the news.

The power of the identity card

Computerised communications mean that most of us are now leaving a 'data trail' behind us as we move through life. So as we buy petrol on our card, make a call on the phone, send our emails etc so we are providing evidence about much of what we do and where we are at any particular time. Some forms of identity card could provide the potential for police or government to gain access to most of this material simply and easily. For example, if we used the card regularly to prove our identity, then authorities might be able to use the data from this to trace a great deal about our lives.

Loyalty cards in supermarkets and elsewhere are an example of this type of system, but are relatively innocuous because they only exist to tempt us to buy more. They work on a sort of deal. *We* get money off. *They* learn about our consumer behaviour so they can target us with advertising. Are people aware of this implicit deal?

The supermarkets Tesco and M&S are also just experimenting with a new system whereby products are tagged with a radio frequency identification device that will give them a continuing handle on the items they sell. The rights group 'Liberty' are monitoring how this is going to be used. (<http://www.liberty-human-rights.org.uk/press/press-releases-2003/new-director-warns-supermarkets-we-are-watch.shtml>)

View a clip from Chaucer's '**The Miller's tale**' as recently retold by the BBC. Not quite fair to the original, but here is the arch conman, pretending to everything, ravishing the wife and then slipping away with the loot. The perennial question is how a society protects itself from people like this.

Show a clip from the film **GATTACA**

Here the hero wants to be an astronaut but has a heart defect, which appears on his identity card. He goes to enormous lengths to defeat the identity system so that he can attain his ambition. The film shows the potential power of authorities in this sort of situation. Some would say that 'oddballs' of one sort or another have been the key to creative progress in the world? Would identity cards threaten that progress?

Thinking historically

When human beings adapted themselves to living in cities changes occurred in their relational lives not unlike those occurring today.

In a traditional rural community everyone was known. Intimately. That could be both a comfort a threat. Many may have enjoyed the settled way of life and the sense of belonging. Yet such rural communities could also develop stifling power relations and enact a terrible social ostracism toward those who fell out of favour.

By contrast you could get lost in a city. The complexity of relationships made for social mobility and acted to diminish the potential for oppressive inter-personal relationships. Some would say that the city released a new creative potential for humankind. They were also described as dens of vice.

Some would see modern living as simply a further development of the urban lifestyle.

Making faith connections

On being watched:

The Judaeo-Christian scriptures conceive of God as one who knows us and everything about us.

Study Psalm 139

The writer is clearly comforted by the thought that God knows every detail of our life, when we lie down and when we awake. There is nowhere that we can go, where we can escape the presence of God.

God knowing us is also part of the conception of judgement. For God is the one who 'will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart'. (**1 Corinthians 4 v 5**). Proper accountability is clearly something to be sought for.

Yet all this is framed within the belief in a God who is all good and whose judgements are necessarily right and just. This is the heart of the believer's confidence in the process. If human beings had this power we might not be so pleased.

The group Liberty claims 'The British public are the most spied upon in the Western world'.

On being able to protest:

Biblical narratives record many examples of people of faith challenging the government of the day. It seems that this process of challenge was vital to the well-being of the nation. Yet it often led to a vicious reaction from the authorities. So Elijah needed to retreat from public gaze and the murderous threats of the royal family (1Kings 19). Jeremiah's words were felt to be subversive of national pride and the coming war effort. The king takes steps to prevent their publication. (Jeremiah 36). A host of other examples might be offered of people throughout human history whose protest has been truly significant and yet where the authorities tried to suppress it.

Reconstruct the world of Elijah, assess his role in the national politics of Israel. Where do you see modern equivalents? Are these admirable figures? Should they be controlled in any way?

The ability to challenge government has often depended upon freedom of information, freedom of speech, freedom to assemble and even the ability to hide. If governments are to be called to account these freedoms will need to be protected, but how do we hide from the all pervasive glare of modern tracking systems? How do we assemble if our every move is watched? Would people such as Elijah or Jeremiah today find themselves rounded up, interned or worse?