



Societal ‘Resilience’ to Mass Surveillance in the Post-Snowden Era

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ABSTRACT

The recent Snowden revelations about the massive communications surveillance carried out by the intelligence services in the USA and the UK have had a dramatic effect on the perception of people in, and far beyond, those countries. They now understand the power of such surveillance to shape political and social life, whether or not the security aims of combating terrorism and crime are achieved. The term ‘surveillance society’ is increasingly used in public debate, involving the question of what can be done to resist or respond resiliently to the challenge of surveillance in the digital age. This is because surveillance, introduced in name of greater security, may ironically itself reduce other social freedoms. But how are individuals and societies to go about responding to such developments in order to keep surveillance, including future unknown developments, in check? Spontaneous ‘resistance’ campaigns and demonstrations can be highly effective, yet are reactive, ad hoc, and seem an uncertain way to control state activity. This paper explores how the concept of ‘resilience’ might offer a more systematic way of understanding both the dangers posed by mass surveillance and the strategies that could be adopted in order better to protect societies from its threat. Whereas the concept of ‘resilience’ is a contested term and sometimes regarded as part of neo-liberal securitisation strategy, we show how its meaning is contextual, and how it can be re-appropriated in order to mitigate the harms caused by surveillance to the public goods of free societies, including privacy.