

Watching Big Brother

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Kevin Haggerty will be studying post-9/11 population surveillance.

Just because you're paranoid, doesn't mean they're not watching you.

Exactly who is being watched, who's doing the watching and how paranoid society at large should be are just a few of the questions that will be the focus of a new \$2.5-million collaborative research project involving University of Alberta sociologist and criminologist Kevin Haggerty.

The New Transparency: Surveillance and Social Sorting, a seven-year project, was announced today as a Major Collaborative Research

Initiative supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

"The starting assumption is that transparency surveillance has become the dominant organizational practice of contemporary society," said Haggerty. "Closed-circuit TV, dataveillance, e-mail tracking, cameras, satellite, all of these tools essentially make people and processes transparent to other groups and other institutions."

The researchers are interested in the processes and social implications of the rise of transparency.

The new project will examine the history, key characteristics and consequences of the new transparency. The areas of focus will include the role of technology companies in fostering surveillance; networking sites like Facebook; surveillance in conflict zones; inappropriate surveillance and, in Haggerty's case, post-9/11 developments, including profiling and surveillance at events like the Olympics.

"I want to look at how surveillance has become one of the key ways in which we are trying to respond to terrorist threats and the implications of that for movement, borders, globalization, marginal types of populations and those sorts of things," he said. "Muslim groups are the classic example, but any number of groups have become profile targets."

One of the main themes of the research will be to look at the concept of 'social sorting,' first introduced by project leader David Lyon, sociology professor at Queen's University.

"Surveillance practices are essentially used to sort us, people, into different categories and, depending on where we fit into those categories, we get different levels of service, different levels of access, different levels of institutional response," said Haggerty. "All of that is

contingent on making us known in particular ways, what are our consumption patterns, what is our level of access, what's our password, all of that."

"The idea is that surveillance is part of the process of sorting people into these categories and then changing their levels of service, rights and responsibilities."

Furthermore, Haggerty says the study promises to not only explore how people are not aware of their own potential transparency, but the larger issue of where today's privacy draws a line in the sand.

"Do you need a realm of privacy in order for democracy to function? Technology is moving so fast and making our lives so increasingly transparent that we start to ask, 'At what spot do we reach a tipping point where we surrender our privacy completely?'"

Haggerty will be collaborating with a global group of researchers, including Elia Zureik, Lauren Snider and Art Cockfield at Queen's University; Kirstie Ball at the Open University, UK; Colin Bennett at the University of Victoria; and Andrew Clement at the University of Toronto. Researchers from a number of other countries will collaborate on the project, while representatives from industry and government will act in an advisory capacity.

Source: University of Alberta

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