Spy Drones Added to Britain's "Surveillance Society"

By REUTERS
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LONDON (Reuters) - It could be the 4 million closed-circuit television cameras, or maybe the spy drones hovering overhead, but one way or another Britons know they are being watched. All the time. Everywhere.

The latest gizmo to be employed in what civil liberty campaigners are calling Britain's 'surveillance society' is a small, remote-controlled helicopter that can hover above inner city streets and monitor suspected criminals.

Unveiled in the north of Britain this week, it could be introduced across the country if deemed a success, fuelling an already intense debate over whether the "Big Brother" world George Orwell predicted is now truly upon us, or whether such scrutiny is merely essential for security in the modern era.

"For us, this is a cost-effective way of helping to catch criminals," said Simon Byrne, a senior police officer in the Merseyside district who launched the spy drone project.

Britain is now the most intensely monitored country in the world, according to surveillance experts, with 4.2 million CCTV cameras installed, equivalent to one for every 14 people.

So blanketing is the surveillance that the average resident of London runs the possibility of being photographed up to 300 times a day just moving around the capital, civil liberties campaigners Liberty say.

The pervasiveness of the cameras, combined with the government's plans to introduce digital identity cards for all citizens in the coming years and expand its DNA database, has led to calls for a halt until the impact can be better studied.

In a report issued earlier this year, the Royal Academy of Engineering warned that increased monitoring of society actually risked provoking a breakdown in trust between individuals and the state, eventually causing more harm than good.

"The state should remain the ultimate protector of citizen rights to privacy and should not garner new powers to invade the privacy or increase surveillance without strong justification," it said in a study filled with carefully measured language.

"SOCIAL SUICIDE"

As well as civil liberty campaigners growing increasingly alarmed at the tightening web of surveillance, some police officers have also expressed concern, saying excess monitoring is disrupting otherwise tranquil communities.
Spy Drones Added to Britain’s “Surveillance Society” - New York Times

The deputy chief constable of Hampshire, a leafy county west of London, said this week he feared Britain was becoming an Orwellian society, with quiet villages now wired with cameras.

“I really don’t think that’s the kind of country that I want to live in,” Ian Redhead told BBC television.

The conundrum for many is that while they don’t want to feel constantly under surveillance themselves, they don’t mind demanding the benefits of CCTV if it might do some good.

When the Cutty Sark, a famous 19th century trading ship, went up in flames on Monday in a possible arson attack, the first call by angry citizens was to urge on the police to study footage to see if any perpetrators could be spotted.

Perhaps the greatest perversity about the explosion of surveillance is that experts say it doesn’t necessarily do any good. While crime has gone down in some areas, studies show that it’s seldom due to the presence of CCTV cameras. In fact, there is evidence that cameras can provoke more criminal behavior.

“If people start to feel they are constantly under surveillance, the feeling of being watched starts to create the behavior that the surveillance was there to prevent,” said Kirstie Ball, an expert in the impact of surveillance on society and a professor at the Open University Business School.

“Once you feel the screws are being turned, that your every move is being pinned down, you actually start trying to find ways to get around what’s become a pervasive system.”

An irony is that while most people don’t want to feel monitored or observed by a government, many will reveal lots about themselves on Web sites and reality-style TV programmes, getting titillation from what would otherwise be an irritation.

Yet ultimately, she worries that the breakdown in trust that can be created between individuals and the state by excess surveillance is the greatest long-term worry.

“It can actually make for a slow social suicide,” she said.

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