

Balance Surveillance With Public Discourse

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SURVEILLANCE measures have their merits and have indeed been useful in past instances, but their gradual expansion in Singapore should not go unchallenged.

In an unstable world perpetuated by what former US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld calls "unknown unknowns" - terrorism, conflicts, general instability - it is assumed that people feel safer and more secure under watchful eyes, electronic or otherwise.

US President Barack Obama, when quizzed about the controversial spying programmes of the National Security Agency, remarked that "you cannot have 100 per cent security and also then have 100 per cent privacy and zero inconvenience".

While concerns over civil liberties have not surfaced in Singapore, and the problem is not as acute here, increasing surveillance should be balanced with public discourse.

Second Minister for Home Affairs S. Iswaran has encouraged owners of private buildings to strengthen protocols for video surveillance, and also recognised AMK Hub for adding 20 new cameras to its 110-strong closed-circuit television (CCTV) contingent "Call to boost surveillance in buildings"; Jan 18).

It may not be in the interest of the private companies, but his appeals at the National Safety and Security Watch Group award ceremony should drive Singaporeans to ponder the implications of heightened surveillance in public and private spaces.

The traditional arguments for widespread monitoring and observation are still valid.

The deterrent effect is most apparent when individuals, cognisant that they might be under watch all the time, begin to police themselves and refrain from "socially unacceptable" behaviour. CCTV cameras have been commonly used to settle disputes, to prove wrongdoings. Some have even called for these surveillance endeavours to be expanded to nab those who flout traffic rules and to keep litterbugs, loan sharks and smokers in check in the neighbourhood.

The camera never lies, many reckon.

Yet there is value in public conversations. Insofar as individuals understand the trade-off between security and privacy or civil liberties, these exchanges - with the corresponding dissemination of information - can help regulators and business owners strike the right equilibrium.

In fact, if people have a stake in the decision-making process, they could be more convinced by the necessity of these security features, and simultaneously engage in discussion on crucial questions.

For instance, will the over-reliance on technological surveillance erode personal and civic responsibilities if the prevailing predilection is to go to the tape? How will the footage be stored and processed, and who will have access to these video clips in the future? Have there been unfortunate cases of abuse or misuse?

Safety and security cannot be taken for granted. The same goes for privacy and civil liberties.

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