

Privacy is Disappearing

[According to IVPM](#), which calls itself “the world’s leading video surveillance information source,” Americans “vastly underestimate” how often their movements are recorded on closed-circuit television (CCTV):

“The majority of [1,000 respondents to this Google Consumer Survey](#) assumed they were recorded on CCTV camera 4 times or less per day.”

But the real number is about *ten times that*.

Although the IVPM article itself does not supply the data to back up that claim, nobody is more credibly placed to make it. Given my own experience, I have no trouble believing it. So, granted that people who get out and about in urban areas are recorded by CCTV 30-40 times a day, what does that tell us about what’s happening to our lives?

Viewed in isolation, all it tells us is that the use of surveillance technologies keeps spreading to a greater extent than most people realize. That’s because the needed hardware is becoming ever cheaper and more efficient. And it’s not just cameras. In the military, reconnaissance drones, satellites, avionics, and sensors in general keep improving and enabling ever-more reliable intelligence. “[Biometrics](#)” techniques are used by both the military and domestic law enforcement, which makes it less likely that innocent people will be prosecuted and easier to track real terrorists and criminals. Indeed, electronic and IT technology as a whole keep making more and more information available to more and more people—including you and me.

For the ordinary individual, the upside of all that seems greater than the downside. Better surveillance and intelligence generally improves security, and access to useful

information has never been as great. Of course, such access can be and is abused sometimes. But even that disadvantage is limited. As one meme quips: “I possess a device, in my pocket, that is capable of accessing the entirety of information known to man. I use it to look at pictures of cats and get in arguments with strangers.”



But there's a very real downside that only gets bigger as the technologies spread. Tech giants such as Facebook and Google gather far more information about us than we realize, and leverage that to their advantage. The National Security Agency can eavesdrop on almost anybody's cell-phone calls. As the ability of the powerful to track our movements, conversations, relationships, and preferences increases, so does the capacity for controlling us, and thus the capacity for tyranny.

So the main question raised by all this surveillance tech is how much we're willing to risk loss of liberty for the sake of greater security. A saying often attributed to Benjamin Franklin has it: “Those who prefer security to liberty deserve neither.” Assuming that's true, we need to come together as a polity to decide when to say “Enough!” to all the spying.

Michael Liccione earned his Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania and has taught at nearly dozen institutions of higher education.