

# *Living in the gaze of the Smart Nation and its sensor-enabled lamp posts*

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Someone remarked to me the other day that to call the ubiquitous device that is never far from our hands a “smartphone” is a bit of a misnomer, given that we mostly use it for every purpose other than telephony. We use it to surf the Internet, stream movies and music, text, e-mail, do business, take pictures and so forth. And only rarely, it seems, do we talk on it.

In the same way, to refer to the latest Smart Nation offering as “smart lamp post” makes it sound as though it is merely a street lamp with a camera tacked on to it. Given its powerful and far-reaching surveillance capabilities, it does

rather a lot more than that.

Technology is central to Singapore’s Smart Nation project. It is true there are other crucial aspects of realising the Smart Nation vision, such as transforming society’s prevailing mindset, culture, processes, structures and so forth. But really, it is the technology that stands out if for no other reason than it is tangible, visible, and frankly, impressive.

The smart lamp post, an integral part of the Smart Nation Sensor Platform, has come across as more shock than awe because of its ability to give the Government the ability to obtain highly granular information about people, based on geospatial mapping, facial recognition and artificial intelligence capabilities mapped onto Singapore’s ubiquitous national identity card system. A

person’s identity, location, race, gender, age, and even behaviour, can be pinpointed.

Predictably, there have been adverse reactions stemming mainly from privacy concerns and how such information might be abused or compromised.

Apart from privacy intrusions, surveillance technologies give rise to even more insidious applications: the ability to discipline and punish.

English philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s 18th century idea of the “panopticon” – a single tower in a prison yard that enables the prison warden to monitor prisoners – is particularly apt, given how it is evocative of the all-seeing smart lamp post.

The panopticon works on the principle that while the prison guard can see what all the prisoners

are doing, the prisoners cannot see what the prison guard is doing. Because of this asymmetry, the prisoners cannot know if they are being watched, and therefore behave in the desired way just in case they are being watched. Replace “panopticon” with “surveillance technology” and “situational awareness”, and the similarities become uncomfortably stark.

The network and surveillance technologies that underlie the Smart Nation’s smart lamp post, and other similar initiatives elsewhere, constitute a double-edged sword. The same technologies that empower citizens and improve their lives are also the same technologies that allow governments to monitor and manage behaviour (either via “nudges” or more forceful

manoeuvres), and to punish deviation from the desired behaviour.

So while such technologies can improve the provision of public services – the pre-eminent of which being security – they also go beyond that to shape behaviour, nudging citizens to behave this way or that. Such technologies now determine, to a large extent, how societies are governed.

It is generally held that societies are governed based on laws, rules, norms, and standard operating procedures. It is actually more accurate to say that societies are governed based on the threat and meting out of punishment of deviations from those rules and norms.

Such technologies will not only allow governments to punish transgressions, but also to even pre-empt them. Indeed, Michel Foucault used the concept of disciplinary power to explain how the anticipation of control and punishment causes people to engage in self-surveillance, which then results in them behaving in the manner desired by authority in the first place.

Today, many diverse technologies permeating the various networks in which we live, manifest the increasingly pervasive power to discipline and punish.

In other words, what Singapore as a society should be concerned with, is not simply the technological capabilities of the smart lamp post, but what it symbolises: the perpetual gaze of

authority on the people.

Aside from the obvious privacy dimension, living under the constant gaze of the government may have consequences for a society’s psyche.

Take innovation, for example. Imagine a society trying to break away from its deeply-entrenched risk averse and hierarchical culture. Such surveillance technologies, and the implicit power to discipline and punish, can scuttle efforts at innovation, which are inherently risky and involve testing rules and boundaries. The anticipation of surveillance by authority could result in self-surveillance, self-monitoring, self-censorship, and a growing reluctance to improvise, innovate and take risks; in short, to deviate from the rules.

The challenge for societies will be to balance the security imperative on the one hand, while mitigating the potentially suffocating psychological effects of living under the panopticon’s gaze on the other.

If we uncritically privilege the security and order that surveillance power can bring about, without appreciating the broader and unanticipated consequences, we could risk choking off the serendipity and messiness in which innovation and improvisation thrive.

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