

## Current affairs: Government Surveillance



### Warmer questions

1. Do you feel safe when you are walking around the city?
2. The police frequently use CCTV cameras to prevent crime, do they make you feel safer?
3. How comfortable are you with sharing information about your private life?

### Reading section

#### Move along citizen

In a world that is becoming at risk of terrorism and all kinds of threats, a new tendency is becoming prevalent in terms of security: Spying on citizens and in so doing limiting their civil rights. This current trend has become particularly widespread after the aftermath of 9/11, but is it actually helping us to make a better society? Or is it silently undermining our personal freedom? The risks of having a “big brother” that knows everything about us and controls our personal information might just be too big of a compromise to obtain that “security” governments promise. Moreover, considering the fact that in most cases these programs have shown no real result compared to those focused on following actual suspicious individuals, this just represents a real drawback our individual rights for privacy: just because you want to keep something private, it doesn’t mean that you are a terrorist, it means you have a normal life. Some people defend these new security laws by stating that “if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to be afraid of”, however, this argument seems like a severe over-generalization because people still have the right to keep their personal lives as private as they want and even have their own personal secrets. Besides all of this, it is important to consider the implications this could have in the actions that governments might take towards those innocent individuals considered “dangerous” after spying their personal data. This issue certainly affects everyone regardless of their political opinion, so it’s important to be very well informed about it.



**Ideas to consider for later:**

1. Should governments possess that much access to people's private information?
2. Can people really do anything to protect their information from the government?
3. How far should the government be able to get in order to obtain personal information?
4. Is it really worth it to sacrifice personal freedom over constant surveillance and security?
5. Is it correct that a government might take legal actions over the presumption that someone could be a terrorist? Why?

**Useful vocab to talk about surveillance**

Match the vocab on the left with the definitions on the right. If you're having difficulty the answers are given below.

|                                     |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Terrorism                        | a. Supervision focused on one particular individual who is a suspect of terrorisms or other crimes.  |
| 2. Civil liberties                  | b. USA government surveillance office.   |
| 3. Terrorist Surveillance Program   | c. Fundamental rights that every citizen should be entitled to have as a part of society.  |
| 4. Hijackers                        | d. To encipher or encode a message or a digital signal.  |
| 5. Leak                             | e. Government program dedicated to supervising all citizen movement and personal information if they are considered possible terrorists.                   |
| 6. NSA (National Security Agency)   | f. The constant condition of being closely watched by the government.  |
| 7. Encryption                       | g. The legal principle that establishes that there should be balancing between competing values in order to decide the appropriate magnitude of a measure. |
| 8. Surveillance state               | h. Spreading of secret information by an unnamed source.   |
| 9. The principle of Proportionality | i. The use of violence and threats to frighten and force one's will on another, esp. for political purposes.   |
| 10. Targeted surveillance           | j. Terrorists that capture or control a vehicle with people to hold them as hostages or kill them.   |



Read the questions below and first have a guess as to what the answers might be. Then watch the video and try to answer as many questions as you can.

- a) When was the Terrorist surveillance program created?
- b) How many suspects were called for interviews by the FBI?
- c) How many terrorists were found after all that investigation by the FBI?
- d) When did the Snowden leak happen?
- e) Which companies were touched by the NSA to retrieve information?
- f) Who was already a target of the FBI before the surveillance programs?
- g) Why did Apple decline to disable the encryption of the iPhone software?
- h) What can the NSA already do to spy on people?
- i) What happened after the Paris Attacks?
- j) Which country has undermined freedom of speech in the last few years? How?

**Follow the link below to watch the video and potentially modify your answers**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9\\_PjdU3Mpo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9_PjdU3Mpo)

### **The pros of public surveillance**

1. It improves security and makes people feel safer.
2. It can reduce crime rates and allow for evidence to be collected.
3. Cameras can be used for long periods of time to understand crime hot spots and use better-policing methods to stop activity in the future.

### **The cons of public surveillance**

1. Can be easily abused to spy on people who are totally innocent.
2. The effectiveness is still in question. Many are placed as a precautionary measure and not actively used to stop crime.
3. They are very expensive and are often broken or tape is not monitored.

### **Potential debating topics for use in class:**

1. Why do you think terrorism has become so widespread in the last few years? Who benefits from this? Why?
2. If 9/11 hadn't happened, things wouldn't be the way they are nowadays. Everything would still be completely perfect as it was before those attacks.
3. The US government has an unstoppable aspiration to become the "world police" and does not pay attention to sovereign governments or civil rights to apply the law as it wishes.
4. If you have more information, of course, you will have more chances to find the criminals and terrorists that can put us in danger: Surveillance state is a NECESSARY THING, no matter what.
5. Ethnic profiling is a must: Terrorist all come from the same place so we should just target them and no one else.
6. Could spy agencies really limit encryption at all in the future? If so, can it be stopped somehow? Why is this essential for privacy?
7. If the FBI lied to the public once, they will do it again and again as long as they fulfill their objectives in the name of "freedom" and "security".
8. "If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear" is completely true: everything should be public, how else could we discover terrorists and achieve true security?



9. These increases in surveillance control by the US government ARE an improvement in Democracy. Privacy elimination is just a collateral loss that we have to deal with.
10. Would a constant surveillance state be so bad if we are actually more secure with it?

### **Final thoughts**

Terrorism is a constant threat that we wish could disappear with just the right measures, but the application of a mass surveillance state represents a very controversial issue to actually expect only good things from it. Is it worth to give away your personal freedom of privacy just to see if the odds of catching terrorists might increase? Is it worth it considering that other more specialized programs actually have had good results in the past? What should be the limit of these surveillance programs? Too many questions arise from this topic and very few answers actually seem convincing, so we have to carefully consider the price we want to pay for our “true freedom”.

