

GOVERNMENT USE OF CITIZEN INFORMATION

The Chinese Government recently went public with its latest surveillance technology: smart glasses, connected to a national surveillance infrastructure, that provides police with real-time intel on whether a person or car matches their watch-list records.

It's a story that fits easily into a Minority Report-like image of China—the spiritual home of the 'surveillance state'. Reuters refers to the glasses as 'black tech', aligning the technology with the political direction China is taking.



The article states: "China, under President Xi Jinping, is making a major push to use artificial intelligence, facial recognition and big data technology to track and control behaviour that goes against the interests of the ruling Communist Party online and in the wider world".

Stepping away from hyperbole, what's happening in China differs only from America or Australia in the interface attached to the national data-set: the smart glasses deliver a more convenient way for police to access the data.

Western countries are easily the equal of China in their enthusiasm for turning their citizens into atoms in a 'Big Data' universe. And citizens are either giving permission to build those data-sets or they're only vaguely aware of what's happening.

In Australia, the federal and state governments are moving to have a single, national database to store facial recognition features. The Federal Government will contribute passport photos to the database, while individual states will contribute driver's licence photos. Our Federal Government aims to unify the public interface into one digital identity.



Interestingly, one of the gateways to do this is operated by Equifax, most famous for one of history's largest data breaches.

Forced digitised interaction is another, notable issue for citizens. For example, connecting with Centrelink without some form of online interaction is nearly impossible. And those who believe Centrelink's debt debacle was confined to unemployed are forgetting the many other ways and reasons for citizens to connect with Centrelink — disability benefit, carers' benefit, family tax benefit, childcare rebate and pensions, to name a few.

When the Australian Bureau of Statistics expanded the amount of stored citizen data, as well as the information shared with social and medical researchers, public consultation was an afterthought.

The point of this list is to explain that Australia's government, like all governments with the means to do so, has long gone beyond data collection in departmental silos. Now, it's indexing and collating, building a vast concordance of citizen data.

In data collection, I'd argue, there is no longer a vast difference between democratic and non-democratic governments. And China's use of 'black tech' is easily replicated—simply buy and deploy the technology.

It could be argued that China has a fluid, possibly arbitrary definition of who should be arrested, legitimately. Or, that even in the absence of a formal Bill of Rights, Australians are protected by the goodwill of those who serve us.

And so, Australia lazes when it should be active; dozes when it should be debating. We're already at risk of having our personal information used against us, while the collection and cross-indexing of our data expands year-on-year. We need to elevate privacy and data protection to the political sphere and keep it there.

About the author: *Shara Evans is recognized as one of the world's top female futurists. She's a media commentator, strategy adviser, keynote speaker and thought leader, as well as the Founder and CEO of [Market Clarity](#).*

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