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A true surveillance society can now be achieved, anywhere in the modern industrial world, if that is what the population or leadership wants.

That sounds like something George Orwell might have said in one of his more paranoid moments. But I'm afraid those words come from someone who's a lot closer to us, both in space and time.

Indeed, the words aren't from Nineteen Eighty-Four, but from 1999, and the writer wasn't George Orwell, but David Flaherty, the former B.C. information and privacy commissioner. Mr. Flaherty's words accurately captured the state of information technology in 1999; four years later, the threat of a surveillance society is greater than ever.

Strangely, we usually only hear about the dangers of information technology in science fiction novels. Sure, certain isolated projects receive a lot of publicity, such as the Vancouver police department's proposal to place cameras around the city. But many of the developments that represent the greatest threat to privacy seem to fly under the radar.

For example, did you know that right now, satellites orbiting 750 km above the Earth's surface could be taking photographs of your home, and beaming them on the Internet?

Or that people can find out if you've purchased anti-depressants, or condoms, or political literature, simply by checking your credit card records? Or that people with access to water metering technology can tell when you're taking a shower?

The lack of awareness of these intrusions into our privacy suggests that the growth of information technology far outpaces our progress in understanding the meaning and impact of such technology.

And as long as we're unaware of the impact of surveillance technology, we'll be a captive audience for any government that chooses to impose a surveillance society upon us.

Fortunately, it looks like we might not have to remain in the dark for much longer. The University of Ottawa has just announced the start of a major, four-year study that will examine whether privacy is becoming an anachronism in our increasingly technological age.

The project, titled *On the Identity Trail: Understanding the Importance and Impact of Anonymity and Authentication in a Networked Society*, will receive \$3 million in funding from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council, and another \$1 million from corporate partners.

It will be led by my friend and former colleague, Ian Kerr, who is Canada Research Chair in ethics, law and technology at the University of Ottawa's faculty of law. Ian has assembled an outstanding group of 23 privacy experts, including Ann Cavoukian, Ontario's information and privacy commissioner, and Marc Rotenberg, who heads the Electronic Privacy Information Center in Washington, D.C.

The team will also include philosophers, ethicists, lawyers, engineers, computer scientists, policy analysts and business leaders, all of whom will work together to bring an interdisciplinary focus to the study of privacy in an age of surveillance technology.

Ian, who's spending the year as a distinguished visiting scholar at the Universitat Pompeu Fabre in Barcelona, tells me over the phone that the project will investigate three main areas.

First, philosophers and social scientists will study the meanings of concepts like privacy and anonymity. Then, lawyers will consider the legal dimension, including whether the Charter of Rights and Freedoms includes a right to anonymity. Finally, the techies will take over, if not the world, at least this project, and they'll look at new technologies that serve to bolster privacy.

The project should therefore help to ensure that our understanding of information technology catches up to the technology itself. In so doing, it could have a profound effect on every aspect of human interaction -- from international business practices to the way we communicate in our own homes.

By gaining insight into the meaning and impact of surveillance technology, we'll also be better prepared if our leadership decides it wants to thrust us into a surveillance society. And if we decide for ourselves that such a society is right for us, at least we'll enter that brave new world with our eyes open.