Guest editorial

A covert future?

It has often been reported that George Orwell's involvement with the Spanish Civil war was the defining experience of his life. It greatly influenced his writing of *Animal Farm* published in 1945 and 1984 published in 1949. Both books were about systems of oppression and oppressive regimes. In 1968, Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote in *Cancer Ward*:

> As every man [and woman] goes through life he [she] fills in a number of forms for the record, each containing a number of questions. There are thus hundreds of little threads radiating from every man [and woman], millions of threads in all. If these threads were suddenly to become visible, the whole sky would look like a spider's web [. . .] people would all lose the ability to move [. . .].

Once a significant level of technological interoperability was achieved big data existed. Big data is not new. At present, we simply have *Even Bigger Data* making possible the horrific societies which Orwell and Solzhenitsyn wrote about. In the not-too-distant future with the cloud, big data, and maybe 80-90 per cent of the world's population online and connected the scope for systems of oppression seems limitless. Consequently, we must consider and counter what oppressive regimes of tomorrow's world could and might do in their drive to subjugate humankind (Rogerson, 2015).

In 2013, the Edward Snowden disclosures, for which he has been described as a hero, a whistleblower, a dissident, a patriot and a traitor, shocked the world. Here was clear evidence of how technology was being used covertly to *survey and control* citizens. The impact of these disclosures continues to reverberate worldwide. It is therefore appropriate to devote a Special Issue of the *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society* to this topic. It is based on an international project led by Andrew Adams and Kiyoshi Murata. As such they are the guest editors of the special edition.

The project comprised studies in seven different countries to analyse the impact and perception of the social and ethical issues raised by Snowden. After a scene-setting introductory paper, each study is reported in detail in separate papers. The data sets collected have been consolidated to enable a comparative analysis to be undertaken which forms the basis of the final study paper. The special issue is unusual in that the co-authorship of several papers includes both the guest editors. This is unsurprising given the close cooperation of the project's team of international researchers. For this reason, the anonymous review process was overseen by me, as Editor of *JICES*. The order of authors for each paper is based on the contributions made. The special issue concludes with a paper from Robin Wilton in which he reflects on the study and the implications for us all, as we move in to a future which may or may not be dominated by covert surveillance and societal manipulation.

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Reference

Rogerson, S. (2015), *The ETHICOMP Odyssey: 1995 to 2015*, Self-published on www.researchgate.net, 12 September, doi: 10.13140/RG.2.1.2660.1444.