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- [Politics](#)
- [Technology](#)
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- [Personal Finance](#)
- [Portfolio](#)
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Leslie D'Monte | New Delhi May 14, 2009 Last Updated at 00:51 IST

# India ranked 20th largest electronic police state

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The system hasn't yet reached its full shape in India, but the basics are in place.

Nineteen Eighty-Four (also referred to as 1984) — a novel by the English author [George Orwell](#) which was published in 1949 and focused on a totalitarian regime — is back to haunt us. The novel had become famous for its portrayal of pervasive government surveillance and control. Terms such as ‘Big Brother’ and ‘Orwellian’ have since become part of the surveillance lingo.

Even movies like the ‘Minority Report’ depicted the police and government intelligence agencies with micro aerial vehicles used in [SWAT](#) operations for surveillance purposes. The movie ‘THX-1138’, for instance, portrayed a society where people are drugged with sedatives and antidepressants, and have surveillance cameras watching them everywhere they go. So did the movie ‘Gattaca’; which portrayed a society where biometric surveillance to check if people are genetically-engineered ‘superior’ humans or genetically natural ‘inferior’ humans was used. The list is endless.

Now a private company called Cryptohippie Inc., which surveyed 52 countries for having the most aggressive procedures to monitor residents electronically, tells us that India ranks No. 20. The report, called The [Electronic Police State](#), assessed the status of government surveillance around the globe for 2008.

Not surprisingly, the rankings for the year of 2008 show China and North Korea occupying the top spots as the most complete Electronic Police States in the world, followed by Belarus and Russia. The UK (England/Wales), US and Singapore follow closely on their heels.

The usual image of a “police state” includes secret police dragging people out of their homes at night, with scenes out of Nazi Germany or Stalin’s USSR. The problem with these images is that they are horribly outdated, states the report. “That’s how things worked during your grandfather’s war — that is not how things work now.”

An electronic police state is quiet, even unseen.

In an Electronic Police State, every surveillance camera (CCTVs, etc.) recording, every email you send, every internet site you surf, every post you make, every check you write, every credit card swipe, every cellphone ping — are all criminal evidence, and they are held in searchable databases, for a long, long time. “Whoever holds this evidence can make you look very, very bad whenever they care enough to do so,” states the report.

This system hasn’t yet reached its full shape in India, but all of the basics are in place and it is not far from complete in some places, notes the report.

Indian cyberlaw and security experts, however, note that the survey has not taken into consideration the full import of the [IT Act 2000](#) which was amended in late 2008, and the impact of the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks. “I believe that had they done that, India would have figure in the top 10 countries, and would rub shoulders with France and Germany,” asserts Pawan Duggal, Supreme Court advocate and cyber law expert. He notes that amendments to the IT Act will definitely convert India into a full-fledged electronic police state. “While the government should surely take cognizance of breaches of security in the light of national security considerations, it will have to learn to strike a balance with the rights of individuals,” he cautions.

Internet guru and head of IT for Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) Vijay Mukhi, concurs with this view. He points out, though, that “currently the implementation of security measures on the ground is poor.” We (India) do not have the equipment, and while we do have laws, they are yet to be implemented, he adds. “Most of the surveillance technology is imported from Israel and the UK. Now security vendors are known to install backdoors in the software which can help them sniff the data,” he cautions.

### **You are being watched; nowhere to run**

China has been ranked the No1 electronic police state for no small reason. As part of China's Golden Shield Project, several US corporations such as IBM, General Electric, and Honeywell have been working closely with the Chinese government to install millions of surveillance cameras throughout the country, along with advanced video analysis and facial recognition software, which will identify and track individuals everywhere they go. They will be connected to a centralised database and monitoring station, which will, upon completion of the project, contain a picture of the face of every person in China — over 1.3 billion people.

Law enforcement and intelligence services in the UK (ranked 5th) and the US (ranked 6th) possess technology to remotely activate the microphones in cellphones, by accessing the phone's diagnostic/maintenance features, in order to listen to conversations that take place nearby the person who holds the phone. Mobile phones are also commonly used to collect location data.

In the US, for instance, under the Communications Assistance For Law Enforcement Act, all phone calls, VoIP and broadband internet traffic (emails, web traffic, instant messaging, etc) are required to be available for unimpeded real-time monitoring by federal law enforcement agencies. Computers are also a surveillance target because of the personal data stored on them. If someone is able to install software (either physically or remotely), such as the FBI's “Magic Lantern” and CIPAV, on a computer system, they can easily gain unauthorised access to this data. Another form of computer surveillance, known as TEMPEST, involves reading electromagnetic emanations from computing devices in order to extract data from them at distances of hundreds of meters.

Surveillance cameras are often connected to a recording device, IP network, and/or watched by a security guard/law enforcement officer. In the UK, for instance, there are about 4.2 million surveillance cameras -- 1 camera for every 14 people.

The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) is funding a research project called ‘Combat Zones That See’ that will link up cameras across a city to a centralised monitoring station, identify and track individuals and vehicles as they move through the city, and report “suspicious” activity (such as waving arms, looking side-to-side, standing in a group, etc).

Even social networking sites are under scrutiny. Many US government agencies such as the DARPA, NSA and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) are currently investing heavily in research involving social

network analysis. One common form of surveillance is to create maps of social networks based on data from social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter.

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