

Dittrich Boulevard and Stasi consciousness

At the height of its powers, Stasi received approval of a plan to be allowed to spy on every single East German citizen. Given the right circumstances, Bangladeshi agencies would like to have similar powers, especially as telephone technology spreads to millions of new people. The proposed wiretapping laws that come into effect this month are the first step in the creation of an omnipotent, surveillance-police state. The time to stop it is now -- if it ever becomes like Stasi, it will by then be too late.

NAEEM MOHAJEMEN

WITH the arrival of 2006, Bangladesh faces a new form of state intervention. According to the newly passed amendment to the Telecommunications Act, the government now has the power to spy on any telephone call or e-mail. In addition, communications with the outside world that are deemed to be "against the national interest" (by whom?), can be blocked. Of course some level of spying by our intelligence agencies has always been going on -- especially targeting opposition politicians, activists, and artists, but not limited to these groups. The difference now is that this amendment makes it legal, so that spy transcripts can be admitted in court. More likely, they will be used to blackmail ordinary citizens (unless we are under some illusion that government agencies are moral and will "do the right thing"). There has been a lot of protest against this amendment, but the government has ignored all of this. Unless lawyers and activists group together to fight this law in court, we will soon experience a full-blown surveillance state.

I often do comparative analysis to look at issues in a different light. In this spirit, I researched a conversation between Robert Darnton and Hans Albrecht Grohmann during a recent trip to Germany. Darnton is one of the contributors to CTRL+SPACE: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother (ZKM Center for Arts & Media, MIT Press, 2002). Hans Grohmann is a researcher who was given access to the files of East Germany's dreaded Stasi secret police. Stasi is an abbreviation for the Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (Ministry of State Security) of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), aka communist East Germany. In 1990, demonstra-

tors took control of the Stasi headquarters on Dittrich Boulevard in Leipzig. This action was fueled by rumours that Stasi were burning all the files in the archive. When the building was finally occupied, they discovered that some files had been destroyed, but not all -- the sheer volume was too great.

The citizens committee that had taken control of the Stasi building realized they had opened up a can of worms. There were files on so many individuals, everyone would be affected by the information here. The committee felt that they could not open the files up to the general public. If people uncovered who spied on whom, mass recriminations would follow, perhaps even violence. In an effort to learn something about East Germany's all-encompassing surveillance state, while minimizing the fallout, the committee invited some researchers to examine the files. Hans Grohmann was one of these researchers, and in conversations with him, and subsequent essay for CTRL+SPACE, Robert Darnton summarized some of his main discoveries.

According to Grohmann's research, a typical dossier on an East German citizen was between five to thirty pages. This would include a cover sheet explaining why this person was being investigated. The three more typical reasons were: another citizen had denounced them as a traitor, the state suspected they were having contacts with westerners, or they needed clearance to travel. The main part of the file would contain a description of the person's private life with cross-references to other files; a neighbourhood police report; a report by a Stasi agent assigned to the person's place of employment; and miscellaneous reports by other spies. At the end of the file would be a sum-

mary and a decision as to next steps.

Hans Grohmann describes the Stasi files as having an overall spirit of "misanthropy and distrust." Most of the files were focused on citizens who came into contact with different segments of society, especially westerners. The most comprehensive (ergo thickest) files were on writers, actors, artists, professors, musicians, performers, people married to foreigners, and those with relatives in West Germany. The key source of information seemed to be not paid spies, but rather ordinary citizens denouncing each other. This was what decades living in a surveillance state had produced: a nation full of people who made accusations against each other. Denouncing someone else was the easiest way to escape the Stasi's attention. The subjects of denunciation ranged from the absurd to the chilling. A neighbour's daughter wearing a cross around her neck; neighbours receiving mail from West Germany; people who watched western television; teachers who encouraged debate in classrooms -- the list of possible crimes was endless.

In addition to denunciation, Stasi hired ordinary people to be spies. One of the GDR's targets was to have one adult spy for every ten citizens in Leipzig by 1994. The favoured occupations for spies were, again, those who had the most contact with the public: train conductors, cleaning ladies, priests, and teachers. Kindergarten teachers were trained to ask their students about the conclusion of the children's program from the previous night. Those who had watched West German television were unable to answer the question and betrayed the fact that their parents were watching western television.

In a surveillance state, it takes very little effort to make people betray each other. In

fact, typical Stasi spies were paid only 400 marks a month. There was also the incentive of receiving a bigger pension on retiring. But a much bigger factor was the desire to avoid punishment. If someone refused to spy, the Stasi could put them in prison without trial, refuse permission for travel, and exact other kinds of retribution. A note about "politically negative" attitude could be entered into their file, damaging chances of getting promoted, buying an apartment or a car. If there was anything incriminating in their own files, the Stasi would blackmail them into spying. The system was pernicious, as described by Robert Darnton:

"Spies spied on spies. The whole system kept escalating, and in the end all the GDR seemed to be honeycombed with denunciators and secret agents. The Stasi were a cancer eating away at the fibre of society."

In the end, there were very few citizens who were untouched by the surveillance culture. According to Darnton's research, Eric Honecker approved a plan in 1985 to have a computerized file on each of East Germany's 16 million citizens. By 1989, the Berlin headquarters of Stasi contained 6 million files, stored in a 100 km long space. At the height of its powers, the Stasi headquarters on Dittrich Boulevard housed an ultra-modern communications centre for spying on telephone calls. While East Germany was falling back on other markers of economic development, their investment in surveillance technology was so advanced that this system was able to eavesdrop on 2,000 calls simultaneously. Recorded tapes of these phone calls were stored on tapes and entered into files. Researchers say this was equal to 8 km of files. For comparison purposes, this was more archi-

val material than was generated by the duchy of Saxony over 800 years.

Not surprisingly, all this surveillance changed the mass culture of the country. When people walked by the Dittrich Boulevard building, they turned up their collars and crossed the street in fear of hidden cameras. Professors were afraid that one of their students may denounce them, and as a result classroom lectures were denuded of any provocative content. Robert Darnton calls this "Stasi consciousness" -- the feeling of being overheard when you make a phone call, or being watched when you cross a street. Fear was so widespread that people took refuge in Stasi jokes. After the fall of communism, it was rumoured that many former spies had taken jobs as taxi drivers. Just tell the taxi driver your name, went the joke, he already knows your address and phone number!

It may seem that communist East Germany is far away from our current reality, and in some ways it is. The toxic levels of Big Brother culture that descended from communist Berlin would never be tolerated in a democratic Bangladesh with a (relatively) free press. But there is one important similarity. Surveillance agencies have to create a rationale and purpose for their existence. The more spying that is authorized by government and tolerated by citizens, the more powerful surveillance agencies become. At the height of its powers, Stasi received approval of a plan to be allowed to spy on every single East German citizen. Given the right circumstances, Bangladeshi agencies would like to have similar powers, especially as telephone technology spreads to millions of new people. The proposed wiretapping laws that come into effect this month are the first step in the creation of an omnipotent, surveillance-police state. The time to stop it is now -- if it ever becomes like Stasi, it will by then be too late.

Naeem Mohajemen is director of DisappearedInAmerica.org, a project by a group of artist-activists on post 9/11 civil liberties and surveillance. The project is currently being presented in Frankfurt and New York.

Reckless politicization

In our country, it is a distinct culture of the government incumbent to declare all the activities of the previous government destructive for the country and at the same time build upon and consolidate the previous government's mistakes and bad policies. One finds it baffling to imagine what is in store for the nation if things continue in this way, especially as regards reckless politicization.

KAZI SM KHARUL ALAM QUDDUSI

THINKERS say -- and rightly so -- nothing demoralizes good public servants and destroys effectiveness more than favouritism and patronage in recruitment and promotion. To keep a system working and flourishing, one can't afford to be relaxed in respect of rational thoughts and practices. Something based upon irrational and capricious principles might stay temporarily, but is very unlikely to sustain.

On top of that, an important element in the motivation and morale of bureaucrats is the opportunity for promotion to higher levels. Career management involves, among other things, assigning the right people to the right jobs and making full use of their skills. However, our political leadership tends to forget about the plain truths stated above.

Politicization has turned out to be a very popular and indispensable weapon for the governments in Bangladesh. What is of particular note is that it is being reflected and flourished in newer dimensions. Not only in Bangladesh, in whole of South Asia, politicization abuses the recruitment process and encourages the sort of political opportunism among the bureaucrats, thereby protecting incompetence and corruption while undermining efficacy, integrity and, of course, quality.

Having seen previous observations, what has been happening in the administrative arena of Bangladesh as regards recruitment and promotion is just mind-boggling. No real purpose seems to be in place. There may be a momentary gratification but this reckless politicization won't serve anybody's purpose.

The techniques that are being employed in inducting men of choice in the key positions are hurting the recruits' moral standpoint. They will always have the guilt-feeling. The per-

ceived feeling of worthlessness may also creep in. As they will be haunted by this spectre, diffidence is to be reflected in their performance in all the jobs they are assigned to. Not only that, all of them are devoid of quality but the cursed mechanisms -- for example, alleged leakage of question papers as well as alleged appointments on recommendations of party wings -- are apt enough to strip off whatever confidence they possessed.

This is, however, not to mean that politicized recruitment and promotion didn't take place during the tenure of previous regimes. Whenever and however it took place must have brought miseries and created problems to adversely affect the administrative discipline and functioning. It is, in fact, a regular phenomenon in Bangladesh. The degree is, however, the matter at issue. Anyway, the vacuum and bankruptcy that are being created and inflicted upon the administration by the indiscriminate politicization might well become burdensome even for the ones that mastermind and relish in these evil practices.

To be candid, no government in Bangladesh has been sincere enough to provide for motivational incentives to the government employees, rather resorted to favouritism and patronage to strengthen either their political stranglehold or merely to pile up money out of unholy links with the senior civil servants. Successive governments' treatment of recruitment and promotion policies and practices make it quite clear that they are more interested in aggrandizing their narrow interest and that in this affair they are showing real panache as the criterion of political consideration is increasingly gaining strength with every new political leadership in state power.

The bureaucrats are, however, not idle partners in this game of politics. A segment -- not all -- of them have also devised and assimilated various guiles to exploit the political leaders.

Nowadays, they are more than quick to express allegiance to the newly installed party in state power. They don't stop here, rather take every opportunity to poison the political bosses against the bureaucrats they want to make suffer out of sheer spite and jealousy.

Many of them are by now very adept at eulogizing new government and equally cunning in vilifying the government that has just gone out of power. This sort of sycophancy is definitely effacing the vestiges of good sense in the administration thereby destroying the total peace in the service. On reflection and on balance, it won't be an exaggeration to comment that erosion of morality among politicians and civil servants is now unabated and morale of the service is severely brutalized.

The myopic state machinery working under the umbrella of democracy and legitimized by public support seem to have forgotten about the fact that it has been elected and sent to power by the people. What is of enormous pain to the electorate is that it seems relish its isolation, at least its handling of the crucial sectors of the country implies this. Time is running out. It is well overdue for the administration to come back to its senses and comprehend that it has to work for each and every individual of the land. Partisan thinking and, of course, steps are suicidal and turn ridiculous the very legitimacy it enjoys.

In our country, it is a distinct culture of the government incumbent to declare all the activities of the previous government destructive for the country and at the same time build upon and consolidate the previous government's mistakes and bad policies. One finds it baffling to imagine what is in store for the nation if things continue in this way, especially as regards reckless politicization.

Kazi S.M.Kharul Alam Quddusi is Assistant Professor, Department of Public Administration, University of Chittagong.

The fascinating life and work of Charles Van Doren

YASMEEN MURSHED

I am attracted by any book which has the word "history" in the title so it was inevitable that I should find and read "A History of Knowledge: The Pivotal Events, People and Achievements of World History," by Charles Van Doren (pub: Ballantine Books 1991). According to its cover it purports to be "a compendium of everything that humankind has thought, invented, created, considered, and perfected from the beginning of civilization into the twenty-first century." Quite

I order one would think and my first reaction was amazement that "everything" could be summed up in four hundred odd pages of English prose!

The book received good reviews in the Western media when it was first published. One reviewer said that, "Van Doren's book details the development of thought. Covering the expanse of human history, Van Doren highlights people and events that have advanced knowledge and reason to today's standard



TALKING BOOKS

The book is fairly easy reading and instructive and many students have found it useful for getting a quick briefing on the key events in the development of civilization. I was intrigued to learn, for instance, that the mighty Inca Empire which existed for thousands of years never invented writing. More interestingly, the Incas built miles of roads throughout their empire but they never invented the wheel so all travel took place on foot.

Another wrote that, "A coherent journey from the beginnings of writing and philosophy to the computerized technology of the modern era. How knowledge and learning have changed the course of human events and our understanding of the world."

Van Doren's attempt was to present a history of the whole through various parts, so "knowledge" is traced through science, through philosophy, through politics, through literature, and so on. He talks about certain kinds of knowledge -- general knowledge, universal knowledge, certain knowledge, and defines and expands upon these categories throughout the text. He distinguishes between general knowledge and knowledge of particulars, and explores the inter-relationship of knowledge and happiness: "The desire to know, when you realise you do not know, is universal and probably irresistible. It was the original temptation of mankind, and no man or woman, and especially no child, can overcome it for long. But it is a desire, as Shakespeare said, that grows by what it feeds on. It is impossible to slake the thirst for knowledge. And the more intelligent you

are, the more this is so." The book is fairly easy reading and instructive and many students have found it useful for getting a quick briefing on the key events in the development of civilization. I was intrigued to learn, for instance, that the mighty Inca Empire which existed for thousands of years never invented writing. More interestingly, the Incas built miles of roads throughout their empire but they never invented the wheel so all travel took place on foot. They appeared not to know anything about the civilization of the Aztecs in Mesoamerica only a few hundred miles away, mainly due to the limitations of travel. There are many other interesting facts and stories to be found as the book takes the reader through the ages of history introducing pivotal events and the persons who featured in them. These capsule introductions to philosophers and thinkers will tantalize history buffs and whet the appetite for more reading on the subject.

However this outline -- given its meager size it can scarcely be more -- of human history viewed through "the lens of intellectual achievement and the advance of knowledge" has an undeniably selective approach because Van Doren traces almost solely the Western tradition of intellectual

development. This "compendium of everything" mentions Asian thought, philosophy and knowledge rather cursorily and devotes barely two pages to the birth and growth of Islam and its Prophet referring to the contribution of the Muslims to the advance of European scientific theory, more or less in passing. This cavalier disregard for the intellectual heritage of the rest of the world and its European-centric bias makes the book disappointing for those of us who would like to have a broader world view.

Quite as interesting though is the story of the man -- this is the Van Doren who was accused of cheating on the earliest of the quiz shows in the US as far back as the 1950s. It is ironic that he should have indulged in fraud because he was educated enough to have, perhaps, won the prize on his own. Certainly he was better read than the current crop of would-be millionaires so popular on the television today.

Van Doren was a 30 year old English professor at Columbia University when he first appeared on the popular quiz show "Twenty-One." Good looking and well bred as well as a serious academic, he came from a family of intellectual achievers. His father was the Pulitzer Prize

winning poet Mark Van Doren and his mother was a novelist and writer, while his uncle was a noted historian. Van Doren himself had a broad range of interests because although he earned his BA studying a "great books" curriculum he also studied astrophysics and maths.

When a friend told him of the money to be made from quiz shows, Van Doren applied to "Twenty-One" which at the time was facing faltering ratings. The producers saw in him the kind of attractive winner who could popularize the show, so the idea of fraud was born. The producers scripted the program so that Van Doren and another challenger would have a string of ties to build up the drama for Van Doren's eventual victory and the attractive young man played his part to perfection. Fed with answers and coached on how to act during the show, he appeared to television audiences to know about topics as diverse as the natural sciences, American history, and pop culture and he soon became the new champion of "Twenty-One" and ratings for the show began to rise.

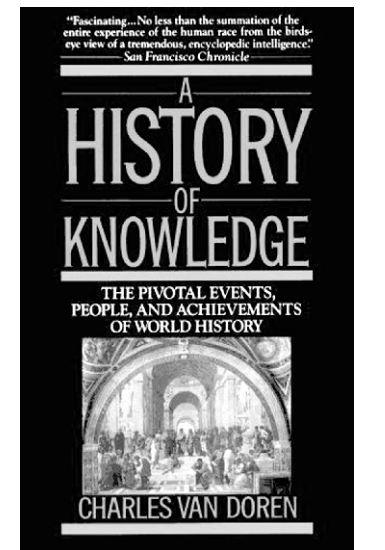
He finally earned \$138,000 -- which was a very large sum at the time. At a Grand Finale he tied and then eventually lost to the new challenger. Because of his

popularity on the show he became a sought after celebrity and the television companies capitalized on this by giving him lucrative contracts for guest appearances as a panelist on other shows.

Finally and inevitably the tabloids found out that the quiz show had been rigged and the scandal broke in a blaze of publicity. Van Doren repeatedly denied that he was involved or that the allegations were correct. He was called to appear before a Congressional Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, which was investigating the quiz-show scandal, and there he finally confessed to being a party to the deception. The media was horror-struck because no matter how gullible they are, the American public does not like being made a fool of, so the reaction against Van Doren was strong. NBC cancelled its contract with him and he was forced to resign from his job at Columbia University and faced strong social ostracism.

The scandal finally faded away and many years later became the basis for a 1994 film "Quiz Show" which had a big name cast and was directed by Robert Redford. It is quite a good film and easy on the eyes because it has the handsome Ralph Fiennes as Van Doren. I wonder whether there is a DVD around?

But what of the protagonist of this morality play? Charles Van Doren's story should have a salutary effect because, as we used to say when we were children, "cheaters never prosper," and that is exactly what happened to him. He more or less went underground after the



A History of Knowledge by Charles Van Doren

scandal broke and led a quiet life, out of the public eye, working as an editor at the Encyclopedia Britannica for many years and writing under a pseudonym. Only when enough time had passed for the scandal to be largely forgotten did he use his real name once again in this book.

The shining promise that his education and erudition could have led to is evident from the scholarship and learning displayed in this book. But unfortunately his reputation was forever besmirched and his "lifetime of reading, thinking, and talking" was tainted by humiliation and ignominy. An object lesson for all who contemplate and engage in fraudulent schemes for personal gain!

Yasmeen Murshed is a full-time bookworm and a part-time educationalist. She is also the founder of Scholastica School.