The Panopticon: Surveillance, Control, and Modern Social Issues

A premium intellectual English lesson tracing an idea from an 18th-century prison design to the smart phone in your pocket — and asking what surveillance actually does to the people living under it.

Level: C1–C2 (Advanced)
Duration: 90 minutes
Format: One-to-one coaching
Focus: Listening · Reading · Speaking · Vocabulary · Analytical Writing · Critical Thinking

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1 intellectual discussion

Discuss these questions with your teacher before watching the video. There are no right answers — only honest ones.

1. **Personal:** Think of a place or moment when you knew you were being watched or recorded — a CCTV camera, a video call, a monitored workplace. Did it change how you behaved, even slightly?
2. **Observation:** Think about your own smartphone or social media use. What kinds of tracking are you aware of, and how much do you actually think about it day to day?
3. **Analysis:** Why do you think people often behave differently when they believe they are being observed, even if nothing bad would actually happen if they didn't?
4. **Evaluation:** Is it worth giving up some privacy in exchange for greater safety or convenience? Where would you personally draw that line?
5. **Abstract:** Does surveillance make society safer, or does it make people less free?

Try to give **extended answers**. Avoid one-word replies — explain your reasoning and give real examples wherever you can.

2 video comprehension

Before watching, spend 1–2 minutes on the prediction question below.
Then watch the video and complete Parts A and B.
▶Watch here: youtube.com/watch?v=-VeaQqweOwE

SCAN ME

Predict: What happens to people's behaviour when they believe they might be watched, even when they cannot know whether anyone is actually watching them? Discuss your prediction with your teacher, then watch the video and compare.

Part A — True or False?

Write T (True) or F (False).If a statement is false, correct it.

#	Statement	T / F
1	Bentham designed the Panopticon as a circular prison where a single guard at the centre could observe every inmate.	
2	According to the video, inmates in the Panopticon could always tell whether they were being watched at any given moment.	
3	The video says Foucault viewed the Panopticon primarily as a practical solution for reducing prison costs.	
4	According to the video, Foucault argued that people who believe they might be watched eventually begin to regulate their own behaviour.	
5	The video argues that panoptic mechanisms are found only inside prisons.	

Part B — Comprehension Questions

1. What design feature of the Panopticon ensured that inmates could never know whether they were being watched?
2. What does the video mean by the "internalisation of discipline"?
3. Why does the video describe the internalisation of discipline as making people "their own jailers"?
4. According to the video, which modern technologies does it compare to the "panoptic gaze"?
5. How, according to the video, did the Panopticon evolve "from a physical architecture to a virtual one"?

2 video comprehension (continued)

Now think more deeply about what the video says.

Part C — Critical Analysis

1. The video claims that believing you "might" be watched is enough to change behaviour, even without proof of actual observation. What assumption about human psychology does this claim rely on, and do you find it convincing?

2. Foucault argued that panoptic mechanisms appear in hospitals, schools, factories, and military barracks. Choose one of these and evaluate whether the comparison to a prison is fair or overstated.

3. The video suggests digital surveillance technologies are "modern iterations of the panoptic gaze." Do you think this comparison holds up, or are there important differences between a prison tower and a smartphone?

Part D — Key Insights

1. In your own words, explain the video's main claim about the relationship between surveillance, knowledge, and power.

2. What does the video suggest happens to "thoughts, desires, and identities" — not just actions — under sustained surveillance?

3. Based on what the video argues, does surveillance make society safer, or does it make people less free?

ESSENTIAL QUESTION — KEEP THIS IN MIND AS WE CONTINUE

Doessurveillancemakesocietysafer,ordoesitmake people less free?

3 listening studio: are we living in a digital panopticon?

Listen to the panel discussion, then complete Parts A and B below.

Before you listen: pay attention to how each speaker qualifies opinions, disagrees politely, introduces evidence, and uses examples to support claims — you'll need this for Part D.

Jordan Blake	**Dr. Amara Osei**	**Dr. Priya Nair**	**Marcus Webb**
Moderator	Philosopher	AI & Technology Expert	CivilLibertiesAdvocate
Technology-and-society journalist	Bentham, Foucault, autonomy, freedom	Facial recognition, data, safety uses	Privacy, consent, accountability

Part A — Main Ideas

1. According to Amara, what did Foucault's argument shift the focus from "being watched" toward?
2. What distinction does Priya draw between Bentham's uncertainty and modern workplace monitoring?
3. What three concrete benefits of surveillance does Priya list?
4. According to Marcus, what tends to happen to a surveillance tool that was originally justified for one narrow purpose?
5. What four things does Marcus say are necessary for surveillance to be trusted, regardless of the technology involved?

Part B — Who Said It?

Write which panelist said each line: Amara, Priya, or Marcus.

"You just need them to believe they might be watched. Once that belief is in place, people start supervising themselves."	
"Bentham's prisoner faced uncertainty — is the tower occupied right now or not. A lot of modern monitoring isn't uncertain at all."	
"A tool that's justified for one narrow purpose has a way of quietly expanding."	
"The technology genuinely saves lives. I don't think it's honest to pretend otherwise."	
"Maybe the honest answer is that we've just traded a tower we could see for one we can't."	

3 listening studio (continued)

Part C—ArgumentTracker

For each panelist, note their main claim and one piece of supporting evidence they used.

PANELIST	MAIN CLAIM	SUPPORTING EVIDENCE
Dr. Amara Osei		
Dr. Priya Nair		
Marcus Webb		

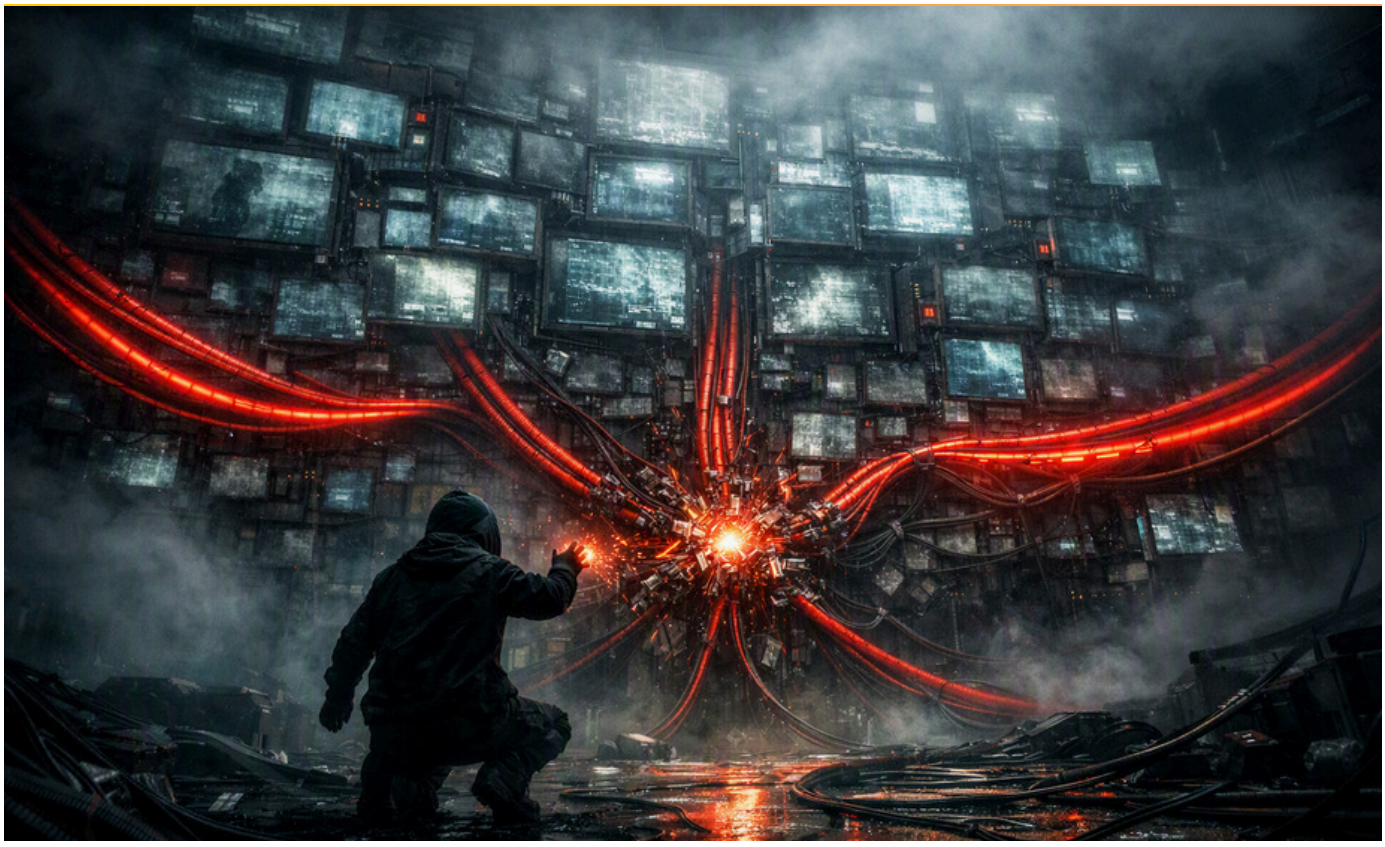
Part D — Language in Context

Find an expression from the discussion that each speaker uses to do the following. Write the phrase and who said it.

1. **Agreeing:** _____
2. **Disagreeing diplomatically:** _____
3. **Conceding a point:** _____
4. **Qualifying a claim:** _____
5. **Challenging an assumption:** _____

Part E — Evaluation

Which panelist presented the strongest argument? What evidence or reasoning made the position convincing?

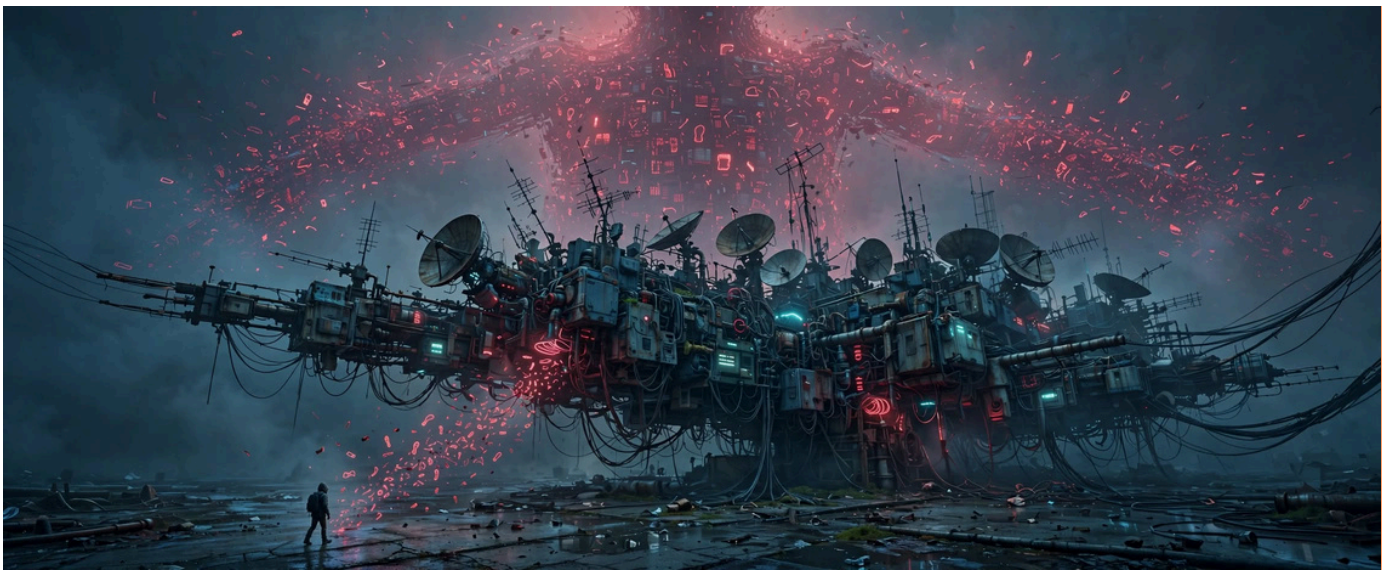


4 vocabulary development

Read, repeat, and master these words before reading the article.

Match each word (1–15) with its correct definition (A–O). Write the matching letter in the **Answer** column — the definitions on the right are deliberately shuffled and do *not* correspond to the row they sit in.

#	WORD	ANSWER	DEF	DEFINITION
1	utilitarian		A	the practice of restricting one's own expression to avoid consequences
2	verifiable		B	the process of making an external rule or belief part of one's own automatic thinking
3	internalisation		C	open and easy to see through; not hidden
4	fine-grained		D	to combine many separate pieces of information into a single whole
5	apparatus		E	judging actions or institutions by whether they produce the greatest overall benefit
6	aggregate		F	detailed and precise, especially down to a small scale
7	byproduct		G	to discourage someone from doing something through fear of consequences
8	chilling effect		H	behaviour that matches accepted norms or expectations
9	self-censorship		I	a secondary result produced in addition to the main, intended effect
10	conformity		J	matching in size or degree to what is actually needed
11	consent		K	able to be checked or confirmed as true
12	transparent		L	required to explain or justify one's actions to others
13	accountable		M	voluntary agreement given with full understanding
14	proportionate		N	the complex system of institutions or mechanisms that carry out a function
15	deter		O	a discouraging influence that makes people avoid a legal or ordinary action out of caution



4 vocabulary development (continued)

Now put these words to work in new sentences and in conversation.

Gap-Fill — Complete each sentence with a word from the box

WORD BANK
utilitarian · internalisation · apparatus · byproduct · chilling effect

1. Bentham was a(n) _____, judging institutions by whether they produced the greatest benefit for the greatest number.
2. Foucault called the process by which a watched person begins to police their own behaviour the _____ of discipline.
3. The article describes schools, hospitals, and workplaces as part of a wider _____ of social control.
4. According to the article, uncertainty in digital surveillance is often simply a _____ of complexity, not a deliberate design choice.
5. Researchers have found that online tracking can produce a "_____," making people quietly narrow what feels safe to say or explore.

Vocabulary in Context — Choose the correct word for each new sentence

WORD BANK
verifiable · aggregate · fine-grained · deter · proportionate

1. The auditor asked for _____ evidence before accepting the company's claims.
2. Marketers often _____ years of browsing data into a single detailed profile.
3. A _____ analysis of the data revealed patterns that a broader summary would have missed.
4. Visible security guards are often enough to _____ casual shoplifting.
5. Critics argued the punishment was not _____ to the severity of the offence.

Discussion — Use at least one vocabulary word in each answer

1. Can you think of a rule or system whose effects were mostly a **byproduct** rather than its original intended purpose? Do
2. you think most people give truly informed **consent** to the data collection they are subject to online? Why or why not?
3. Is there a system in your life that operates with real **accountability**, where someone could actually be challenged if they misused it?
4. When, if ever, do you think **conformity** is a healthy response to being observed, rather than a loss of something valuable?
5. What would make you trust that a surveillance system near you was being used in a genuinely **transparent** way?

5 original reading article

Read the article below, then complete the comprehension activities on the next page.

The Panopticon Revisited: How Surveillance Shapes Modern Life

An original Fluentora feature on architecture, power, and the psychology of being watched

In 1786, the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham sat down to describe a building that, as far as anyone can tell, he never saw built in his lifetime. The idea had actually come from his brother Samuel, an engineer who had designed a circular workshop so that a handful of supervisors could watch an entire factory floor of unskilled labourers at once. Jeremy saw something bigger in the design. He called it the Panopticon — from the Greek for "all-seeing" — and proposed it not just for factories but for prisons, hospitals, schools, and workhouses: any institution, in his view, that needed to turn disorder into discipline.

The architecture itself was simple enough to sketch on a napkin. A ring of cells surrounds a central tower. Every cell is backlit, so each occupant is always visible in silhouette from the tower, while the tower itself remains shadowed, its occupant invisible to everyone outside it. No prisoner can ever know, at any given moment, whether the tower is manned or empty. That single design choice was the entire point. Bentham was a utilitarian: he believed institutions should be judged by whether they produced the greatest benefit for the greatest number, and he was convinced that constant, verifiable supervision was expensive and unreliable, while the mere *possibility* of supervision was nearly free and, if uncertainty was total, arguably more effective. A guard has to sleep. Uncertainty does not.

It took roughly a century and a half for a French philosopher to turn Bentham's blueprint into one of the most influential ideas in modern social thought — and it is worth being precise about what changed in the process, because the two men were not making the same argument. Michel Foucault, writing in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), was not interested in the Panopticon as an architectural proposal for cutting prison costs. He was interested in it as a diagram of how power operates once it no longer needs
to announce itself. Where Bentham asked how to make supervision efficient, Foucault asked what supervision does to the person being supervised, whether or not anyone is actually watching.

His answer was that the watched person eventually stops needing a watcher. Once a prisoner has fully absorbed the possibility of being seen, he polices his own behaviour continuously, correcting himself before any guard could. Foucault called this the internalisation of discipline, and he considered it a far more efficient form of control than force, because it requires no visible enforcement at all: the subject becomes, in his memorable phrase, the principle of his own subjection. Crucially, Foucault argued this mechanism was never confined to prisons. He traced the same underlying logic — continuous visibility producing continuous self-correction — through schools, army barracks, hospitals, and factories, all of which, in his account, quietly train people into becoming manageable, productive, self-regulating subjects without any single authority needing to give a direct order. This wider social pattern he called discipline in the broad sense, and the fine-grained management of entire populations through it he termed biopower.

It is easy, at this point, to let the words blur together, so it is worth pausing on distinctions the rest of this article depends on. *Observation* is simply noticing something. *Monitoring* is doing so systematically, for a purpose. *Data collection* is the gathering and storage of information, which may or may not involve watching anyone at all. *Surveillance* specifically implies monitoring intended to track, understand, influence, or control. And *social control* is broader still: the whole apparatus, formal and informal, that keeps behaviour within accepted norms, of which surveillance is only one instrument among many. A neighbourhood where everyone simply knows everyone else practises a mild form of social control through observation and reputation, with no monitoring infrastructure whatsoever. A supermarket loyalty card, by contrast, involves extensive data collection with no observation of anyone's face at all. These are not interchangeable words describing one phenomenon; they are different mechanisms that happen
to overlap constantly in practice, which is exactly what makes the modern version of this problem harder to reason about than Bentham's tower.

That modern version is worth naming plainly: most surveillance today has no tower, no guard, and often no human being anywhere in the loop at all. CCTV networks, facial recognition systems, employee monitoring software, smartphone location logs, social media activity tracking, and algorithmically targeted advertising all share Bentham's central premise — that behaviour changes under the possibility of being watched — while discarding almost everything else about his design. The Panopticon's uncertainty was binary and momentary: is the tower occupied right now, or not? Digital surveillance is closer to continuous and cumulative: it does not merely observe a moment, it aggregates months or years of moments into a profile that can outlast the behaviour it describes, be sold, be combined with other profiles, and be acted upon by systems no individual can see or petition. A single location ping from a phone reveals almost nothing on its own; a year of them, cross-referenced against purchase history and browsing data, can reveal
a person's health conditions, religious practice, or plans to leave a job, often before the person has consciously decided any of it themselves.

Article continues on the next page →

5 original reading article (continued)

The question this raises is not simply "are we being watched more than before," which is almost certainly true, but something more specific: what actually changes when surveillance becomes continuous, automated, and largely invisible, rather than occasional and embodied in a single visible authority? Foucault's prisoner at least knew a tower existed. Many people living under algorithmic monitoring do not know which systems are active, what they record, who can access the results, or for how long the data will be kept. Uncertainty, in Bentham's design, was a deliberate psychological tool aimed at a known population for a stated purpose. Uncertainty, in the digital version, is more often simply a byproduct of complexity — nobody designed it as a disciplinary technique, but it produces a strikingly similar effect anyway.

The behavioural effects Foucault predicted in theory are increasingly measurable in practice. Researchers studying online behaviour have repeatedly found that people browse, search, and post differently when they believe they are being tracked, a pattern often described as a "chilling effect": not necessarily doing anything wrong, but quietly narrowing the range of what feels safe to say, read, or explore. Something similar shows up in workplaces with heavy monitoring software, where employees report increased stress and a tendency toward visible, easily-measured busyness over genuine risk-taking or creative problem-solving, precisely because the metrics being watched reward the former and cannot easily detect the latter. Trust changes too, in both directions: colleagues who know they are being monitored by the same system sometimes report trusting each other less, on the theory that a coworker's cooperative behaviour might simply be performance for the cameras rather than genuine goodwill, even as they simultaneously report trusting the *system* itself more, since it appears to remove the need to take anyone's word for anything. None of this requires anyone to be caught doing anything. The mere awareness of possible observation appears sufficient to shift behaviour toward caution, conformity, and self-censorship, exactly as Bentham predicted, though he considered that a feature rather than a risk.

It would be a mistake, though, to treat this as a simple indictment of surveillance as such, and the case for it deserves to be taken seriously on its own terms rather than waved away. CCTV genuinely does help identify suspects after violent crimes, and its presence measurably deters certain categories of opportunistic crime in well-lit, well-monitored areas. Workplace monitoring has caught real safety violations before they caused injuries, particularly in industries involving heavy machinery or hazardous materials, where a missed procedure can be fatal rather than merely costly. Fraud-detection systems built on transaction monitoring recover billions of dollars a year that would otherwise be stolen from ordinary account holders, often flagging a stolen card within minutes of unusual activity. Location data has helped find missing children and disoriented elderly people within hours rather than days. Emergency responders increasingly rely on networked sensor and camera data to reach the right place faster, sometimes cutting response times in ways that plausibly save lives on their own. None of these are hypothetical or marginal benefits, and anyone arguing seriously about surveillance has to hold both truths at once: that these systems save lives and money, and that a legitimate purpose does not, by itself, settle how much surveillance is acceptable, who should control it, or what happens once the emergency that justified it has passed.

That is really the question this whole history has been circling. Bentham asked whether supervision could be made efficient. Foucault asked what supervision does to the soul of the person being watched. Neither question, on its own, tells us where to draw a line between a security camera at a train station and a system that logs every face that walks past it indefinitely. That line seems to depend less on the existence of surveillance than on five more specific questions: whether it is proportionate to the actual risk it addresses, whether its existence and scope are transparent to the people subject to it, whether those people had any meaningful opportunity to consent, whether some independent body can hold the operators accountable for misuse, and who, exactly, is allowed to access the data once it has been collected. Bentham's tower, for all its unsettling design, at least had walls: a fixed location, a finite population, a purpose stated on paper. The digital version has none of these natural boundaries, which is precisely why the old questions about who watches, why, and under what limits have become harder to answer and considerably more urgent to keep asking.

6 reading comprehension

Now test your understanding of the article.

Part A — Understand

1. According to the article, what did Bentham's brother Samuel originally design, and how did Jeremy adapt the idea?
2. What specific design feature of the Panopticon made a prisoner's uncertainty possible?
3. How does the article distinguish Foucault's interpretation of the Panopticon from Bentham's original purpose?
4. According to the article, what is the difference between "observation" and "surveillance" as it defines them?
5. What three legitimate benefits of surveillance does the article describe in detail?

Part B — Analyse

1. The article argues that digital surveillance discards "almost everything" about Bentham's design except its central premise. What does it keep, and what does it discard?
2. Compare Bentham's and Foucault's underlying assumptions about why supervision changes behaviour. Where do they agree, and where might they diverge?
3. The article claims a legitimate purpose "does not, by itself, settle" how much surveillance is acceptable. What further questions does it say are needed to settle that?

Part C — Apply

1. Using the article's five distinguishing questions (proportionality, transparency, consent, accountability, data access), evaluate a surveillance system you actually encounter in daily life.
2. The article ends by suggesting Bentham's tower "had walls" while the digital version does not. What would it mean, practically, to give a digital surveillance system "walls" of some kind?

7 advanced writing: analytical argumentation

Task : write a balanced analytical response to—"To what extent does surveillance erode individual freedom?"

Part A — The Skill: Building a Balanced Analytical Argument

Astrong analytical paragraph has a clear **thesis**, supports it with **evidence** and **explanation**, raises a genuine **counterargument**, offers a **concession** or **qualification** where it's honestly due, and closes with a **conclusion** that reflects the nuance rather than flattening it. This requires precise hedging language, not isolated grammar drilled for its own sake:

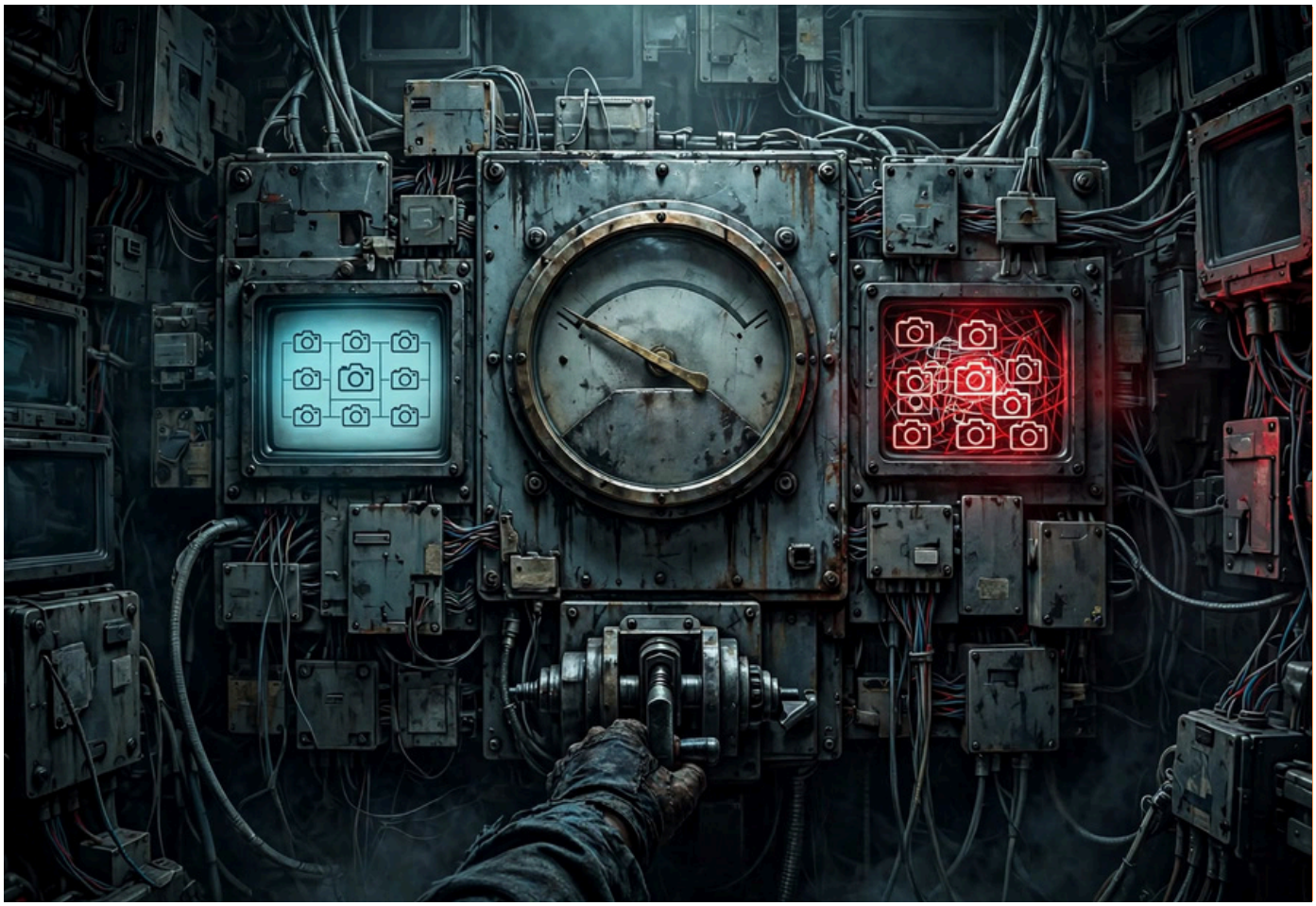
USEFUL LANGUAGE

Surveillance may improve public safety, provided that its use is transparent and proportionate. · To the extent that… · This is complicated by… · While X holds true in some cases, it does not follow that…

Part B — Analyse a Model Paragraph

> *"Surveillance erodes individual freedom to a significant extent, though the degree depends heavily on how it is governed. Constant monitoring, even when merely possible rather than certain, appears to measurably narrow what people are willing to say, search, or do — a pattern researchers describe as a chilling effect. This suggests that freedom is not only violated by direct punishment, but also quietly diminished by the mere awareness of being watched. It would be an overstatement, however, to conclude that all surveillance is corrosive: targeted, transparent systems with clear legal limits appear to produce far weaker chilling effects than pervasive, unaccountable ones. What ultimately determines the damage to freedom, then, is not the mere existence of surveillance but the proportionality and accountability built around it."*

1. Underline the sentence that states the paragraph's thesis.
2. Where does the writer raise a counterargument, and where do they concede a point?
3. Circle every hedging phrase you can find.



7 advanced writing (continued)

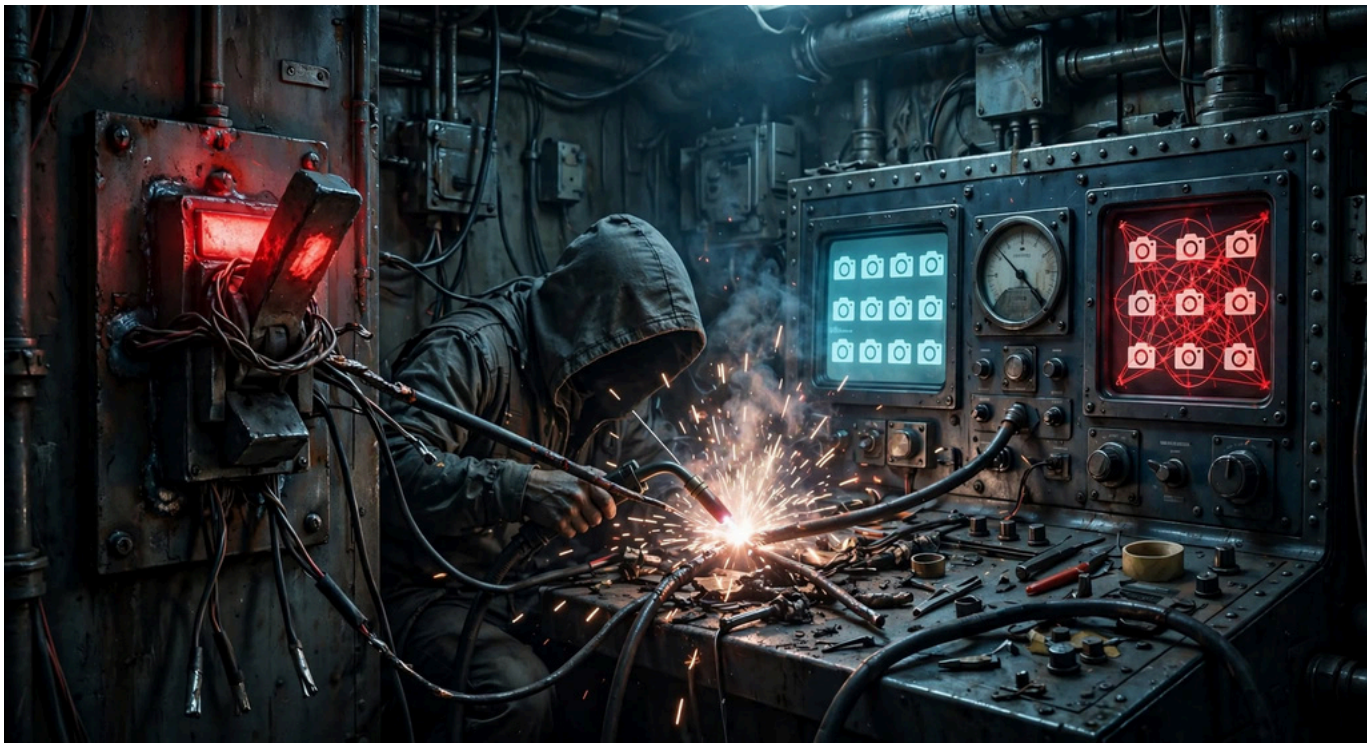
Part C—GuidedEditing

This paragraph has several analytical-writing problems — vague claims, repetition, weak evidence, overstatement, poor transitions, informal register. Identify at least three, then rewrite it using the structure and language from Part A.

> *"Surveillance is really bad for freedom. Everyone knows that cameras and tracking make people scared and less free. This is proven by the video and the article. Governments and companies watch everyone all the time and it's obviously wrong. Nothing good comes from surveillance and people should fight against it always."*

Part D — Independent Writing

Now write your own response (250–300 words) to: **"To what extent does surveillance erode individual freedom?"** Draw on ideas from the video, the Listening Studio, the article, and your own knowledge.



8 critical thinking challenge: the facial recognition decision

This is the most demanding activity in the lesson. You are a member of an independent public oversight committee.

Background: A major city has experienced a rise in violent crime and theft across several transport hubs. The city council is considering introducing AI-powered facial recognition cameras across train stations, airports, major public squares, and large public events. Supporters argue the technology could identify suspects faster, deter crime, locate missing people, and improve public safety. Critics argue it could reduce privacy, encourage self-censorship, produce false matches, disproportionately affect certain groups, and create a powerful surveillance infrastructure that could be misused.

Stakeholders

Government | **Police** | **Civil liberties groups** | **Technology providers** | **Local businesses** | **Residents**

Policy Options

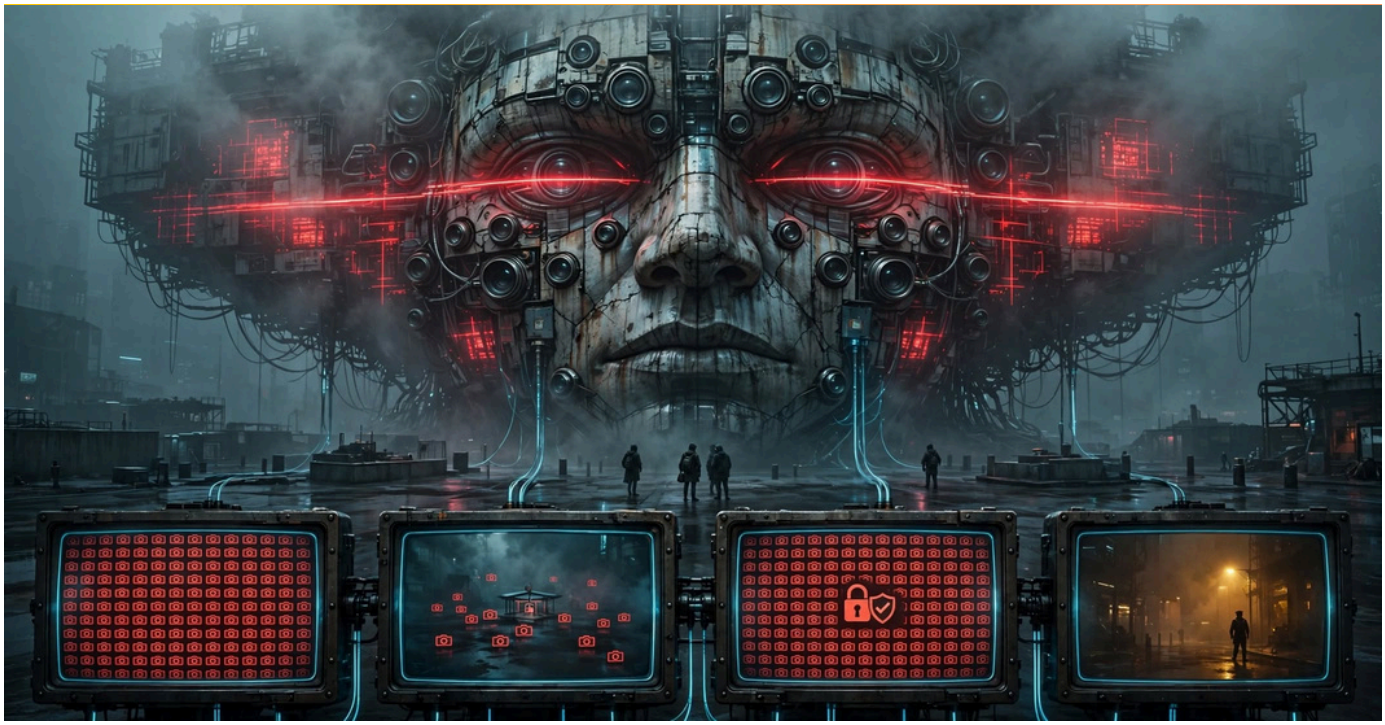
1. **Full deployment** across all proposed locations.
2. **Limited deployment** in the highest-risk locations only.
3. **Deployment only with strict legal and technical safeguards** — independent audits, retention limits, mandatory human review of every match.
4. **Reject facial recognition** and use alternative security measures — increased visible patrols, improved lighting, community policing.

Constraints

Limited budget | **Rising public pressure** | **Legal uncertainty** | **Risk of misuse** | **Pressure to act quickly** | **Limited technical accuracy**

OPTIONAL SCAFFOLDING LANGUAGE

Partial agreement: I would agree to a certain extent, but… · *Challenging an assumption*: That assumes that… · *Qualification*: This may be the case provided that… · *Concession*: There is some merit to that argument… · *Rebuttal*: The problem with that reasoning is… · *Conclusion*: Taken together, these points suggest…



8 critical thinking challenge (continued)

Keep the discussion focused on evidence, ethics, trade-offs, safeguards, social consequences, and autonomy — not partisan politics.

Decision Questions

1. What level of false-match risk — facial recognition misidentifying an innocent person — would be acceptable to you, and why?
2. What specific safeguards would need to be in place before you'd support deployment, even in a limited form?
3. Who should own the data collected by these cameras, and who should be allowed to access it, under what circumstances?
4. How long should footage or facial-recognition data be retained before it must be deleted, and why?
5. What standard of evidence should be required before facial recognition data can be used to justify an arrest or formal investigation?

Final Recommendation

Give a 2–3 minute policy recommendation. You must: choose an option, justify it, acknowledge at least one weakness, address a counterargument, and propose safeguards.

Perspective Shift: Three months after implementation, facial recognition helps police identify a suspect in a serious attack. Public support for the system increases sharply. Does this new evidence change your recommendation? Why or why not?

9 final reflection

One closing question. There is no correct answer — only an honest one.

If you knew that you were being watched most of the time, how might it change the person you choose to be?

> "The question is not whether surveillance exists, but whether it is necessary, proportionate, transparent, accountable, and compatible with human autonomy."

homework: mini project

Task: Surveillance in My Community. Choose one real form of surveillance you encounter in your country, city, workplace, or online life.

You should:

1. Identify the form of surveillance.
2. Explain its intended purpose.
3. Describe its potential benefits.
4. Identify possible risks to privacy or autonomy.
5. Give your own evaluation.
6. Record a 2–3 minute audio reflection answering: *"How does surveillance affect trust in society?"*

Approximately 20–30 minutes. Requires independent thinking and authentic communication. There is no answer key — this task rewards original thinking.

Video Transcript

The concept of the Panopticon traces its origins back to an architectural design proposed by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century. Envisioned as a circular prison, the Panopticon was designed in such a way that
a single guard stationed at the centre could observe any inmate without the inmate knowing whether they were being watched or not. While Bentham imagined the Panopticon as a tool for moral reform and efficient control, French philosopher Michel Foucault saw it as a potent symbol of the intricate relationship between surveillance, knowledge, and power.

In his seminal work *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault delves into the historical transformation of punishment, tracing its evolution from the brutal public executions of the past to the regimented, calculative nature of modern prisons. It is in this context that he introduces the Panopticon as a metaphor for a new kind of power mechanism that operates not just in prisons, but pervasively in modern society. For Foucault, the genius of the Panopticon lies in its ability to induce a state of conscious and permanent visibility, ensuring the automatic functioning of power. When inmates — or individuals in society — believe they might be under surveillance, they internalise the watchful gaze, effectively becoming their own jailers. This self-regulation, born out of a fear of observation, is what Foucault refers to as the internalisation of discipline.

But the Panopticon's influence extends beyond the prison walls. Foucault argued that similar structures of surveillance permeate various institutions in society, from hospitals and schools to factories and military barracks. These institutions adopt panoptic mechanisms to discipline and normalise individuals, shaping them into obedient subjects fit for the workings of modern society. This normalisation process, according to Foucault, is integral to what he termed *biopower* — the regulation of populations by institutions and authorities through various systems of surveillance and discipline. Power entities in modern societies are able to exert subtle forms of control, influencing not just actions but also thoughts, desires, and identities.

Foucault's exploration of the Panopticon serves as a stark reminder of the ubiquity of surveillance in contemporary life. In today's digital age, with the proliferation of surveillance technologies and data collection, his insights resonate more than ever. The omnipresent surveillance cameras, online tracking mechanisms, and data analytics can be seen as modern iterations of the panoptic gaze, constantly reminding individuals of the watchful eyes of power. In essence, the Panopticon has evolved from a physical architecture to a virtual one, encompassing the digital realm and shaping behaviours, relationships, and perceptions in profound ways.

In conclusion, while the Panopticon began as a revolutionary architectural design, through Foucault's lens it transformed into a powerful analytical tool for understanding the intricate relationship between surveillance and power in modern societies. His exploration challenges us to question and critically examine the ways in which power operates — often invisibly — shaping our lives in myriad, subtle ways.

Lightly cleaned for punctuation and clarity from the original spoken narration; no content added or removed.

Listening Studio Transcript

Jordan: So here's a two-hundred-year-old prison design that most of our listeners will never see a photograph of, and yet I'd argue it explains more about your phone than most articles about your phone do. That's the premise of today's conversation — are we, in some meaningful sense, living inside a digital Panopticon? I've got three guests who are going to disagree with each other in interesting ways. Dr. Amara Osei, philosopher — welcome.

Amara: Glad to be here.

Jordan: Dr. Priya Nair, who works on AI and surveillance systems.

Priya: Thanks, Jordan.

Jordan: And Marcus Webb, civil liberties lawyer.

Marcus: Happy to dig into this one.

Jordan: Amara, ground us first. Why does an eighteenth-century prison blueprint still come up in serious conversations about technology?

Amara: Because Bentham's actual design barely matters anymore — what survived is Foucault's argument about it, which is really a claim about psychology, not architecture. His point was that you don't need to watch someone constantly to control them. You just need them to believe they might be watched. Once that belief is in place, people start supervising themselves.

Jordan: Which sounds efficient, if you're the one doing the watching.

Amara: Unsettlingly efficient, yes. And the part I keep coming back to is that Foucault didn't think this was limited to prisons at all — he saw the same mechanism in schools, hospitals, workplaces. Anywhere behaviour needs to be shaped without constant active enforcement.

Priya: Can I push on that a little? Because I think there's a real difference between "might be watched" in Bentham's sense and what we actually have now, which is closer to "definitely being logged."

Jordan: Say more.

Priya: Bentham's prisoner faced uncertainty — is the tower occupied right now or not. A lot of modern monitoring isn't uncertain at all. Your employer's software knows exactly when you're active on your laptop. It's not a maybe.

Amara: Sure, but I'd argue the psychological effect converges anyway. Whether the uncertainty is "am I being watched" or "what exactly is being done with what's being recorded," you still get the same self-editing behaviour.

Marcus: That's exactly where I'd want to bring in the accountability question, because that's the piece Foucault's framework doesn't really address. It's not just whether someone changes their behaviour under observation — it's who's doing the observing, whether they're allowed to, and whether anyone can challenge them if they overreach.

Jordan: Let's get concrete. Priya, walk us through what's actually out there — CCTV, phones, workplace tools, social platforms.

Priya: All of it, layered. Cameras with facial recognition in public spaces. Location logs most people don't realise their phone is generating constantly. Employers using keystroke and activity tracking, sometimes disclosed, sometimes buried in a policy nobody reads. Advertising systems inferring things about you that you never typed anywhere.

Listening Studio Transcript (continued)

Jordan: And you'd defend some of that.

Priya: Some of it, absolutely. Facial recognition has found missing children. Transaction monitoring stops fraud in real time — I've seen the numbers, they're not small. Emergency services use location data to reach people faster. The technology genuinely saves lives. I don't think it's honest to pretend otherwise.

Marcus: Nobody on this panel is going to argue cameras never help solve a crime, Priya. That was never the disagreement.
Priya: Fair — I just want it on the record before we get to the "but."

Marcus: Here's the "but," then. A tool that's justified for one narrow purpose has a way of quietly expanding. A camera installed to catch violent crime at a train station doesn't stay narrowly purposed on its own — someone has to actively decide not to expand it, and that's a much harder political position to hold than just… letting it grow.

Amara: Which brings us back to autonomy, really. Even a system with genuinely good intentions changes something just by existing, if people know it's there. You get subtler public behaviour. Less risk-taking. People asking whether a system built for one purpose might quietly get repurposed for another.

Jordan: Is that actually comparable to Bentham's tower, though? Or are we stretching a two-hundred-year-old metaphor past where it still fits?
Priya: Honestly, I think it's stretched in one important way. Bentham's tower watched a fixed, known population for a stated purpose. A national camera network doesn't have walls like that. It doesn't expire.
Amara: I'd push back slightly — I think that makes the comparison worse, not weaker. Bentham's prisoner at least knew a tower existed and roughly what it was for. A lot of people today don't know which systems are active, what they store, or who can access it. The uncertainty Foucault cared about didn't disappear. It just moved.

Marcus: That's really the crux for me. Not "is surveillance happening" — obviously it is — but proportionality, transparency, consent where it's realistic to ask for it, and some independent body that can actually hold operators accountable when a system is misused. Without those four things, good intentions don't mean much.

Jordan: So where does that leave the original question — does surveillance make society safer, or people less free?

Priya: I don't think it's one or the other. It can do both simultaneously, honestly, depending entirely on how it's governed.

Marcus: Agreed, with an emphasis on "governed." The technology isn't really the variable that decides the answer. The oversight is.
Amara: And I'd add — even well-governed surveillance still changes something in how people behave when they think they might be seen. That part doesn't fully go away no matter how good the safeguards are. Maybe the honest answer is that we've just traded a tower we could see for one we can't, and we're still working out whether that trade was a fair one.

Jordan: Which feels like exactly the right place to leave it unresolved. Amara, Priya, Marcus — thank you.

Amara: Thank you.

Priya: Thanks, Jordan.

Marcus: Good conversation.

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