



Brian Martin

Learning from Delusions

Once or twice a year, I receive a call or email from someone claiming to be under intensive targeted surveillance by the government. They contact me because there's a lot of material on my website about whistleblowing, and some about surveillance. I know governments carry out massive surveillance operations, for example collecting all sorts of electronic communications. However, these callers believe they have been specially selected as surveillance targets, and sometimes for electronic or chemical bombardment too.

One caller said he had written a political novel — unpublished — and therefore the government was monitoring his calls and following his every movement. He was very convincing. I suggested that he obtain evidence of the surveillance, but he always had some excuse, so after several calls I became skeptical. Then, during one call, he said a helicopter was above his house spying on him right then. I said, "Grab a camera, go outside and take a picture." He immediately changed the topic, which convinced me that he was imagining the surveillance.

With others, the delusion is more obvious, for example when they say that a television program contains a message specifically designed and inserted to affect their minds.

My friend Steve Wright used to work for the Omega Foundation in Britain, which studies the technology of repression, including technologies for surveillance and electronic assault. He told me the Foundation would regularly hear from people who believed they were being electronically harassed. He calls them "wavies" after the electromagnetic waves they believe are beamed at them. (Steve and I have written about tactics against the trade in torture technology and about possible uses of such technology in border control (1)–(2).)

I could believe a story about long-term continuous targeted surveillance of leading figures in organized crime syndicates, terrorist cells, or radical trade unions. For most oth-

ers, it just doesn't make sense: there is no obvious reason for them to be an ongoing target of personalized surveillance and harassment.

The Truman Show Delusion

With this background, I noticed a book entitled *Suspicious Minds*. On the book jacket is the teaser "The Truman Show delusion and other strange beliefs."

The Truman Show is the name of a film presenting the fictional story of Truman Burbank, a man who is unsuspectingly the center of a reality TV show, seen worldwide. From birth, he has been surrounded by artificial sets, with cameras recording everything he says and does. Everyone he meets — even members of his own family — are actors. Eventually he discovers the grand deception.

After this film appeared, a few individuals began presenting at Bellevue Hospital in New York, where

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there is a major psychiatric facility, claiming to be at the center of a reality TV show, just like *The Truman Show*. They were the stars, which meant that everything around them was artificial, and the people in their lives were actors. Joel Gold, a professor of psychiatry at New York University, attended some of these patients at Bellevue and was intrigued by their strange delusion.

He was familiar with delusions caused by mental illness. Some individuals believe they are Jesus Christ. Some believe that someone is manipulating their behavior by inserting thoughts into their minds.

The emergence of Truman Show delusions was one of a number of factors that led Joel Gold and his brother Ian Gold, a professor of philosophy and psychiatry at McGill University, to begin rethinking their ideas about mental illness, especially about schizophrenia, in which delusions are common. In their book *Suspicious Minds*, they lay out a hypothesis about the origin of delusions, along the way offering an alternative to today's dominant approach to psychosis, namely that it is neurological (3).

Psychiatry and Delusions

To accomplish this ambitious agenda, Gold and Gold review the history of psychiatry. They then examine some recent research about psychosis, in particular how it varies according to the surrounding environment. One striking finding is that when population centers are larger, psychosis occurs at higher rates: it is lowest in rural regions and small towns, higher in medium-sized cities, and highest in large cities. Other factors increasing the risk of psychosis are being abused as a child, having parents who separated, being an immigrant, and being discriminated against.

Gold and Gold then examine various types of delusions. They classify

them into 12 categories. Examples are delusional jealousy, in which a cheating partner is seen as threatening, and grandiosity, in which a person believes they are Napoleon, have the key to cancer, or can fly. However, by far the most common delusion is of being persecuted.

At this point, I reflected on my contacts with whistleblowers and dissidents. Unlike those with delusions of inescapable surveillance, dissidents tell much more plausible stories, and in many cases there is good evidence to back up their claims. One academic dissident named John, whose case I investigated in some detail, told me a revealing anecdote. One of his supporters had sat in on a discussion by colleagues. They said "John is paranoid" and then proceeded to plot how to get rid of him. Although much delusion is paranoid, not all paranoia is delusional.

Gold and Gold comment that, in principle, there could be an infinite number of types of delusions. For example, a person could believe they are a tree or a clock or a galaxy. But delusions in practice fall into just 12 categories, and every one of them involves people. This is obvious in the case of delusions of persecution. Gold and Gold comment, "Paranoia is nothing more than an overly sensitive form of suspicion that cannot shut itself down" (3, p. 192).

To make sense of the observed types of delusions and research on patterns of psychosis, Gold and Gold postulate the existence of a suspicion system. This, they propose, is one of several modules in the part of the mind that is fast, intuitive, and automatic, sometimes called system 1, whereas system 2

is the slow, careful, rational part of the mind (4). An autonomous suspicion system would be an aid for survival: without conscious processing, it would constantly be on the alert for subtle signs of danger. The sound of a leaf crunching might indicate a predator, and people would be safer responding to lots of false positives — taking action, although there is really no danger — than being complacent when actually there is danger.

Gold and Gold say delusions can be understood as products of a

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disordered suspicion system. Their hypothesis has an attractive feature: it explains why people with delusions can't see how irrational they are. Systems 1 and 2 do not communicate directly, so there is no way the rational mind can intervene and switch off the delusion, which continues to seem completely real. Eventually system 2, the rational part of the mind, offers a seemingly plausible explanation for the delusion.

In large, complex societies, the primary dangers are from other people. The larger the population, the greater the risk of a disordered suspicion system and the higher the rate of psychosis. Gold and Gold's idea allows a prediction that psychosis will become more prevalent

as more of the world's population crowds into cities. Another prediction, or worry, is that more people revealing lots of personal information to strangers via social media may be setting the stage for more mental illness.

Gold and Gold note that delusions adapt to current technological possibilities. Today, with governments and corporations undertaking massive surveillance of nearly all electronic communication, delusions of persecution and being controlled are likely to become more frequent.

The Neurological Imperative

Gold and Gold, in their brief history of psychiatry, note that in the early decades of psychotherapy, practitioners believed that the key to mental

And just as thoughts relating to other people can cause illness, thoughts can also redress it, for example through cognitive-behavioural therapy.

Surveillance and Delusion

Writing about delusions of surveillance is tricky, because in industrial societies nearly everyone is under surveillance. There are surveillance cameras in shops and public places; telephone numbers and times of calls are recorded; Internet browsing is monitored; electronic fund transactions are registered; positions of vehicles are logged; and mobile phones are potential surveillance devices, with location data collected. Is it a delusion to believe you are under surveillance? Certainly not.

The question is whether you are the subject of *targeted* surveillance. Do the police or other government agencies gather and collate all the information collected about you and use it against you in some way?

Some people are targeted this way, for example those suspected of major crimes. Furthermore, it is possible to become a target inadvertently: you might have the same name as someone on a terrorist watch list.

Activists often believe their calls are being monitored — and sometimes they are (5). Some activists play a game with authorities. They talk with each other, over their regular phones, about organizing a disruptive protest, and then find vantage points to watch the nominated location at the scheduled time to see whether police show up. If police are out in force, it's a sure sign of targeted surveillance.

To convince others that you are a target of intensive surveillance and harassment, you need

evidence, such as photos, screen shots, and measurements of electromagnetic fields. Just because something *could* be happening doesn't mean that it is happening. The ubiquity of general surveillance probably has blurred the boundary between reasonable apprehension and delusions of persecution.

Those who want to reduce the amount of information gathered about them can, for example, pay in cash, use proxy servers and encryption, and avoid using mobile phones. If you have undertaken such measures but they seem to do little to reduce the amount of surveillance and harassment, then maybe it is time to read *Suspicious Minds* to better understand the psychology of suspicion.

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functioning was people's systems of meaning. Then came the rise of neurological approaches, in which brain function is assumed to be all-important. Today, most practitioners assume that mental illness is the consequence of a disordered brain.

Gold and Gold want to counter this brain emphasis by pointing to the importance of meaning and culture in the way the mind works, and when the mind becomes disordered. Delusions have meaning.