

FARINGDON PEACE GROUP - PHONES, DRONES & SELF-DRIVING AUTOMOBILES .

Paul Mobbs – self-styled computer nerd and “ecological futurologist” – gave a highly intriguing presentation to a well-attended Peace Group meeting in March; looking at the complex links between the seemingly disparate topics of phones, drones and driverless cars. The links turn out to not only be technical, but also political, commercial, and above all – ecological.

He began by racing through the myriad of ways that machines are now able to track everything we do and where we go; particularly through the many devices and screens and vehicles that rule our lives. These include our web activities, our mobiles, the plastic in our wallets, and the cameras that profile us as we shop or track us as we drive. But interestingly, Paul is fairly laid back about all this tracking – at least as it applies to us in the UK – and doesn’t buy into the usual big brother paranoia. “It’s simple. Because they CAN track us, they DO” he explained. “All this profiling data has value – primarily commercial. It drives increased consumption.” He is of the opinion that it’s perhaps a little scary that much of this surveillance and tracking operates in a legal black hole – but that doesn’t necessarily make it sinister in itself.

But he was less sanguine about the use of tracking when it comes to foreign policy, and this is also where the drones come in. “If you’re in Yemen, don’t borrow anyone’s mobile – it might make you a drone target”. Yes – from your mobile, they know exactly who you are and where you are. When it’s the military that drive the decisions and then policies, then we’re now moving into what’s called “fourth generation warfare”. Future conflicts will be fought by small, technologically enabled groups who cannot readily be distinguished from the population at large; and which will often be tied to geopolitical and commercial interests rather than traditional ideological conflicts. So – you need increased surveillance and you can’t trust anyone.

However, all this pales into insignificance when put in the context of the real threat that we all face, and that is the ecological threat of unsustainable growth – interestingly all fuelled by tracking and surveillance and subsequent profiling. Our drones and phones and driverless cars (as well as PV panels and wind turbines) all require the use of non-renewables – such as rare-earth metals. It means that most of us, from economists to environmentalists, have got it all wrong, and in a few short years we’re going to find out just HOW wrong.

Sjoerd Vogt