

THE BLOG

# Going Undercover: What Pretending to Us About How Surveillance Works

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I'm currently preparing to train 1000 members of the public to be undercover officers for a new immersive theatre piece: [Operation Black Antler](#). Blast Theory, together with our collaborators Hydrocracker, have been researching the techniques used to build a new identity and a cover story. We will teach people how to infiltrate a public event and gather information. And we are setting up an event where the public can try out their new skills. Given that surveillance is always ethically dubious, there has been [plenty of criticism](#) about this idea. But as arts companies that have always been interested in making politically motivated, challenging work, we feel it's important to take a risk of this kind.

Surveillance is everywhere. From Wikileaks to Edward Snowden we have learnt about a wave of technologically-enabled mass government spying on you and me and every device we touch. And then there are the companies hoovering up our data. And it's not just data. Activists in the UK have steadily dismantled the shroud of secrecy surrounding undercover officers spying on peaceful protest groups. To achieve their goals, officers spent years undercover, forming relationships and even having children with their targets. Exposure of these abusive practices - which stretch back decades - have belatedly led to [a full apology](#) from the Metropolitan Police.

Two threads run through these diverse forms of surveillance and monitoring. One is a relaxed attitude in the UK to surveillance. According to [one study for Amnesty International](#), Britain, France and the Philippines were the only countries more in favour of surveillance than opposed to it.

Secondly, there is widespread evidence that elements within democratic states have little respect for the law when it suits them. The CIA has [lied to Congress](#) about the mass surveillance of citizens. And the Metropolitan Police's own report described their undercover unit as operating with "minimal organisational constraints". This unit - the Special Demonstration Squad - supposedly targeting "domestic extremism" - went so far as to infiltrate those campaigning for [justice for Stephen Lawrence](#).

Operation Black Antler is our response to this, a groundbreaking theatre experience that puts the audience inside an undercover operation. You are invited to experience for yourself the murky world of undercover policing and the ethical quandaries that inevitably result. You visit a safehouse and build your new identity. Then you visit a pub where a fundraising gig is being held to explore whether criminal behaviour is being planned.

Since the Stanford Prison Experiment, in which a group of students were divided into prisoners and guards, psychologists have found ways to explore how power and complicity develop in groups of the public. More recently Philip Zimbardo, who led the experiment, became an expert witness in the trial of the soldiers in Abu Ghraib prison. He showed how the culture of the prison corrupted junior officers. These officers were then hung out to dry by the authorities when the scandal of torture and abuse was revealed.

Operation Black Antler draws on this work. It may sound like a game but it's a very serious kind of play. It puts you in a position of power and invites you to consider how to use it. At its heart is a simple question: if you were in charge of surveillance, what would you do?

*The world premiere of Operation Black Antler is at [Brighton Festival](#) (7 - 28 May) with a debate running in parallel [Complicity and the ethics of undercover security](#) on 23 May; followed by performances in Chatham, North Kent 23-25 June.*