

New Satellite Launch

A COMMERCIAL satellite capable of distinguishing objects the size of a tea tray will be launched from America next month. The Ikonos-1 is the most powerful commercial imaging satellite yet built. Its parabolic lens will be able to resolve objects 80cm (32in) in length anywhere on Earth.

Ikonos-1, owned by Denver-based Space Imaging, will be the first of a new generation of high-resolution satellites using technology formerly restricted to government security agencies. Another 10 companies have received licences to launch equally powerful satellites, four of them this year.

Closing in: Ikonos-1 will be able to resolve objects 32in across

Space Imaging's corporate communications director, Mark Brender, told a London meeting of the "Freedom Forum" think-tank last week that the technology would pioneer a "new age of transparency - "we intend bringing death to distance".

Satellite resolution has constantly improved over the past decade. Since the end of the cold war, companies such as EarthWatch, Motorola and Boeing have invested billions of dollars to create satellites capable of mapping the most minute detail on the face of the earth.

The technology is already being used for a vast range of purposes, from media reporting of war and natural disasters, to detecting unlicensed building work and even illegal swimming pools. Brender says "we won't ask clients who they are or for what purpose they want the images".

But the companies have a distance to go before they catch up with governments. The new generation of secret spy satellites can recognise objects 20cm (8in) across.

While Ikonos-1 falls short of the sort of technology featured in the film Enemy of the State, " the privacy implications are vast. The "open skies" policy accepted worldwide means that there are few restrictions on the use of satellites.

Dave Banisar, a Washington DC privacy lawyer and author of The Electronic Privacy Papers, says the next generation of satellites will cause a privacy crisis. "The technology may reach the point where people will be forced to retreat to their basements to find privacy.

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