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SPACE INVADERS: Foreign Correspondent

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A new space race is on, as tech companies rush to launch thousands of tiny satellites that will tell us more about what's happening on our planet than ever before. But will the information be used for good, or for harm?

Satellites were bigger than buses. Now they're coming in shoe-box size, weighing just a few kilos and with an extremely cheap price to match.

"Nanosats" are about to revolutionise space.

We're essentially building a time machine – Rob Simmon, data visualiser, Planet space company

Using smartphone technology, and then some, the plan is for constellations of nanosats to photograph the entire surface of the Earth, every single day. Over time they will yield a rich and growing narrative about what's happening where, and who's doing it.

For better or worse, it will change how people behave – Micah Walter-Range, Space Foundation

Foreign Correspondent producer Mark Corcoran drops in on the space geeks from Planet, the acknowledged leader in a pack of nanosat start-ups, to discover what the very near future in space will look like. In true tech start-up style, it took just four years for San Francisco-based Planet to go from a backyard garage obsession to launching satellites from the International Space Station. The world's largest imagery satellite network is now run from Planet HQ – a hoodie and sneaker-populated warehouse on the grungy side of town.

Daily global imaging opens a suite of possibilities... tracking deforestation, sea trade and illegal fishing, measuring natural disasters and, for some, the most useful tool of all, spying on noxious regimes. America's spies were so impressed, they hired Planet.

Planet's objective is to image the landmass of earth every day... For somebody in my profession that's very exciting – Robert Cardillo, Director, US National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency

There are restrictions on how data is used. Planet can only sell to customers that are ticked by the US Government. But who might they be? For the wider industry there are big ethical issues at play. Where does privacy stop and start? And...

What if someone is using that information for criminal purposes or to harm another person? This is something that the industry is going to have to deal with at some point in the relatively near future - Micah Walter-Range, Space Foundation

And is there enough space in space? Planet says its all-seeing constellation will eventually self-destruct, but some scientists fear an influx of nanosats will just add to the mass of space junk that already threatens existing satellites and the International Space Station.

There's no doubting that the nanosat boom has vast potential for good. But as Mark Corcoran's story shows, technological advances like this can bowl up ethical curve balls.

***Space Invaders* airs on Foreign Correspondent at 9.30 pm Tuesday June 20 and 10.30 am Thursday June 22 on ABC TV, and 6.30 pm Sunday June 25 on ABC TV News. Also on iView.**