

You Are Under Surveillance

CrimethInc.

March 4, 2004

Contents

<i>What's So Bad About Video Surveillance?</i>	3
Minorities	4
Women	4
Youth	4
Outsiders	4
Activists	4
Everyone else	5
But what's the harm?	5
Video Surveillance and Crime	6
Now More Than Ever	7

Public space is increasingly policed by hidden surveillance systems. The private life of the individual is secretly captured, mapped, collected, and owned in effigy by a cabal of private business operations—the security industry.

Ironically, as communities disintegrate and more and more of us find ourselves lost in a faceless mass of consumers, the only ones we can count on to interest themselves in our lives are the enforcers of the laws that govern spaces designated for consumption. Reclaiming space from surveillance would reinforce our freedom to act privately, for ourselves and each other rather than the cameras, and thus enable us to come together out of our anonymity. We've had our fifteen minutes of fame—now point that thing somewhere else!

Such oppressive security measures are only necessary when wealth and power are distributed so unfairly that human beings cannot coexist in peace. The ones who oversee these security systems are mistaken when they claim that order must be established to clear the way for liberty and equality. The opposite is true: order is only possible as a consequence of people living together with freedom, equality, and justice for all. Anything else is simply repression. If cameras are necessary on every corner, then something is fundamentally wrong in our society, and getting rid of the cameras is as good a starting place as any.

As a culture, we are preoccupied with observation, images, spectatorship. Now internet advertisements offer consumers spy cameras and hidden microphones of our own, completing the three steps to panopticon: we watch monitors, we are monitored, we become our own monitors. But when the distinction between observer and observed is dissolved, we do not regain wholeness—on the contrary, we find we have been trapped outside ourselves, alienated in the most fundamental sense.

Here's a quixotic project—get together with your friends and disable all the security cameras in your city, declaring it a free action zone. You know what they say about dancing like nobody's watching.

In full view of the enemy

—Sean Penn for the CrimethInc. ex-Movie Stars' Collective

What's So Bad About Video Surveillance?

The past several years have seen a dramatic increase in closed circuit television camera surveillance of public space. Video cameras peer at us from the sides of buildings, from ATM machines, from traffic lights, capturing our every move for observation by police officers and private security guards. The effectiveness of these devices in reducing crime is dubious at best, and cases of misuse by public and private authorities have raised serious concerns about video monitoring in public space.

These are a few examples of people who might legitimately want to avoid having their picture taken by unseen observers:

Minorities

One of the big problems with video surveillance is the tendency of police officers and security guards to single out particular people for monitoring. It is hardly surprising that the mentality that produced racial profiling in traffic stops has found similar expression in police officers focusing their cameras on people of color. A study of video surveillance in the UK, the leading user of CCTV surveillance systems, revealed that “black people were between one-and-a-half and two-and-a-half times more likely to be surveilled than one would expect from their presence in the population.” It is worth pointing out that, in this study, 40% of people that the police targeted were picked out “for no obvious reason,” other than their ethnicity or apparent membership in subcultural groups. In other words, they were singled out not for what they were doing, but for the way they looked alone.

Women

Police monitors can't seem to keep it in their pants when it comes to video surveillance. In a Hull University study, 1 out of 10 women were targeted for “voyeuristic” reasons by male camera operators, and a Brooklyn police sergeant blew the whistle on several of her colleagues in 1998 for “taking pictures of civilian women in the area... from breast shots to the backside.”

Youth

Young men, particularly young black men, are routinely singled out by police operators for increased scrutiny. This is particularly true if they appear to belong to subcultural groups that authority figures find suspicious or threatening. Do you wear baggy pants or shave your head? Smile—you're on candid camera!

Outsiders

The Hull University study also found a tendency of CCTV operators to focus on people whose appearance or activities marked them as being “out of place.” This includes people loitering outside of shops, or homeless people panhandling. Not surprisingly, this group includes individuals observed to be expressing their opposition to the CCTV cameras.

Activists

Experience has shown that CCTV systems may be used to spy on activist groups engaged in legal forms of dissent or discussion. For example, the City College of New York was embarrassed several years ago by student activists who found, much to their dismay, that the administration had installed surveillance cameras in their meeting areas. This trend shows no signs of abating: one of the more popular demonstrations of CCTV capabilities that law enforcement officials and manufacturers like to cite is the ability to read the text of fliers that activists post on public lampposts.

Everyone else

Let's face it—we all do things that are perfectly legal, but that we still may not want to share with the rest of the world. Kissing your lover on the street, interviewing for a new job without your current employer's knowledge, visiting a psychiatrist—these are everyday activities that constitute our personal, private lives. While there is nothing wrong with any of them, there are perfectly good reasons why we may choose to keep them secret from coworkers, neighbors, or anyone else.

But what's the harm?

Clearly, video surveillance of public space represents an invasion of personal privacy. But so what? Having one's picture taken from time to time seems a small price to pay for the security benefits such surveillance offers. It's not like anyone ever sees the tapes, and let's be honest—being singled out for scrutiny by remote operators without your even knowing about it is not at all the same as being pulled over, intimidated and harassed by a live cop.

Unfortunately, it's not that simple. The fact is, there is very little oversight of video surveillance systems, and the question of who owns the tapes—and who has the right to see them—is still largely undecided.

Many of the cameras monitoring public space are privately owned. Banks, office buildings, and department stores all routinely engage in continuous video monitoring of their facilities and of any adjacent public space. The recordings they make are privately owned, and may be stored, broadcast, or sold to other companies without permission, disclosure, or payment to the people involved.

Similarly, video footage that is captured by public police departments may be considered part of the “public record,” and as such are available for the asking to individuals, companies, and government agencies. At present, there is precious little to prevent television programs like “Cops” and “America's Funniest Home Movies” from broadcasting surveillance video without ever securing permission from their subjects.

Sound far-fetched? Already in the UK—the country that so far has made the most extensive use of CCTV systems (although Canada and the US are catching up)—there have been such cases. In the 1990's, Barrie Goulding released “Caught in the Act,” a video compilation of “juicy bits” from street video surveillance systems. Featuring intimate contacts—including one scene of a couple having sex in an elevator—this video sensationalized footage of ordinary people engaged in (mostly) legal but nonetheless private acts.

Similarly, there has been a proliferation of “spy cam” websites featuring clandestine footage of women in toilets, dressing rooms, and a variety of other locations. A lack of legislative oversight allows these sites to operate legally, but even if new laws are passed, the nature of the internet makes prosecutions highly unlikely.

As video surveillance systems evolve and become more sophisticated, the opportunities for abuse are compounded. Sophisticated video systems can identify the faces of individuals (matching video images to databases of known faces—for example, the repository of driver's license photos maintained by the Department of Motor Vehicles), the objects they carry (including, for example, reading the text on personal documents), and their activities. These systems enable the

creation of databases that detail who you are, where you've been, when you were there, and what you were doing... databases that are conceivably available to a host of people with whom you'd rather not share such information, including employers, ex-lovers, and television producers.

Beyond these concerns, there is the question of the societal impact of our increasing reliance on surveillance, and our growing willingness to put ourselves under the microscope of law enforcement and commercial interests. Once a cold-war caricature of Soviet-style communist regimes, the notion of the "surveillance society" is now employed unironically to describe modern urban life in such supposed bastions of personal liberty and freedom as the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada.

While the nature of such a society has long been theorized by philosophers, critics, and sociologists (Jeremy Bentham, anyone?), the psychological and social effects of living under constant surveillance are not yet well understood. However, the impact of CCTV systems on crime is beginning to become clear.

Video Surveillance and Crime

Touted as a high-tech solution to social problems of crime and disorder by manufacturers selling expensive video surveillance systems to local governments and police departments, CCTV has gained much popularity in recent years. These manufacturers claim that CCTV—which often costs upwards of \$400,000 to install in a limited area—will dramatically decrease criminal activity, and provide a measure of security heretofore unknown to the general public. Yet these CCTV systems are often purchased at the expense of other, less oppressive, less expensive, already proven law-enforcement methods such as community policing, and the statistics do not bear out their claims.

CCTV is often promoted with thinly veiled references to the threat of terrorism: hence their widespread use in the UK, which has long lived with bomb threats and other violent actions. Following the September 11 attacks, video surveillance manufacturers have increased their efforts to court the American public—with some success, as evidenced by recent gains in these companies' share prices.

Attempting to capitalize on an international tragedy to sell products in this manner is tastelessly opportunistic at best—but given the track record of CCTV systems to date, it's downright cynical. According to studies of the effectiveness of video surveillance in use throughout the UK, there is no conclusive evidence that the presence of CCTV has any impact whatsoever on local crime rates. While there have been examples of reduced criminality in areas where CCTV has been installed, these reductions can just as easily be explained by other factors, including general decreases in crime throughout the UK. Indeed, in several areas where CCTV was installed, crime rates actually increased.

Given the widespread use of these systems, it is surprising how infrequently they lead to arrests. According to one report, a 22-month long surveillance of New York's Times Square led to only 10 arrests, and the cameras involved have since been removed. Furthermore, the types of crime against which CCTV is most effective are small fry compared to the terrorism and kidnappings its advocates' claim it stops. A study of CCTV use in the UK found that the majority of arrests in which video surveillance played a significant role were made to stop fistfights. Not only

that, but these were relatively infrequent already; and this hardly seems to justify the exorbitant costs and loss of privacy associated with these systems.

Even more disturbing, if not at all surprising, was the study's finding that incidents of police brutality and harassment captured by CCTV surveillance were routinely ignored. The tapes of these events also had a tendency to be "lost" by operators.

The effect of video surveillance on criminal psychology is not well understood. One Los Angeles study found that cameras in a retail store were perceived by criminals as a challenge, and thus encouraged additional shoplifting.

At best, CCTV seems not to reduce crime, but merely to divert it to other areas. According to one Boston police official, "criminals get used to the cameras and tend to move out of sight."

Now More Than Ever

Given heightened awareness of public safety and increased demand for greater security in the face of growing threats of terrorist violence, projects that undermine systems for social control may seem to some to be in poor taste. But it is our position that such times call all the more strongly for precisely these kinds of projects. There is a vital need for independent voices that cry out against the cynical exploitation of legitimate human fear and suffering for political power and monetary gain.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



CrimethInc.
You Are Under Surveillance
March 4, 2004

Retrieved on 7th November 2020 from crimethinc.com
*Texts adapted by CrimethInc. Anonymists Autonomous. Some source material originally made
public by the Institute for Applied Autonomy.*

theanarchistlibrary.org