

One nation under CCTV

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In recent years there has been frequent media coverage of the UK's position as the "world leader in video and digital surveillance" [1], with more CCTV cameras per citizen than any other country [2]. Some of you may have seen a news item that came out in many newspapers a week or so before Christmas. This item was the announcement of a new report on CCTV in the Great Britain by Big Brother Watch [3]. This report brought together the various arguments against CCTV with a "definitive list of the number of CCTV cameras operated by Britain's 428 local authorities" [4] obtained through Freedom of Information requests sent to every single local council in Great Britain. The report did not include "the many cameras controlled by private individuals and companies, by central government, on our nation's motorways, or those controlled solely by Transport for London and situated on the bus, tube and tram network" [5].

Perhaps inevitably, the Big Brother Watch report has already inspired responses critical of its methodology and sceptical about its figures [6]. There have been similar responses to earlier widely circulated figures of one camera per 14 citizens in the UK [7], and '300' being the number of times a Londoner appears on camera on a daily basis [8]. While it is right that these commentators should draw attention to the questionable accuracy of these statistics, in a sense their responses miss the point. Whether there is one camera per 14 citizens or perhaps only one per 10, the UK remains a world leader in CCTV surveillance. It was reported in 2009 that "over 6000 officials from 30 countries have come to learn lessons" from the underground CCTV room at Piccadilly Circus in central London [9], where "trained staff view more than a billion images taken on 100 cameras in a typical 12-hour shift" and are able to "manually manipulate cameras set high above storefronts, zooming in on a person's face or a car's license plate from well over 100 feet away" [10]. Presumably these 6000 officials were impressed neither by the figure 14 nor by the figure 300, but rather by the fact that the existence of this room is a concrete demonstration of both the capacity of the UK government to watch its people, and its eagerness to do so.

Apologists for CCTV surveillance often argue that it is an efficient and cost-effective way of reducing crime. However, there is a lot of evidence to suggest that this is not the case. A 2002 report by the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders noted that

"Three quarters of the Home Office Crime Prevention budget was spent on CCTV between 1996 and 1998, yet a comprehensive review has revealed the overall reduction in crime was only five per cent. A parallel systematic review carried out by the Home Office that looked at street lighting, however, found a highly significant reduction in crime of 20 per cent." [11]

In 2005 a review of 13 CCTV projects by the Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate reported that in the areas covered by these projects, "CCTV had a negligible effect on crime rates" [12].

The arguments against CCTV primarily revolve around privacy issues. Although cameras are not always switched on (they are often used merely as a deterrent rather than to record), there is always the possibility that ordinary, law-abiding citizens are being recorded carrying out innocent activities. More significantly though, CCTV has the potential to do more than merely record events in a space; CCTV can be used in discriminatory ways to track specific individuals. In 2006 the Surveillance Studies Network (SSN) reported that several British cities were already moving towards digital CCTV systems that "use computer algorithms to search automatically for stipulated people or behaviours" [13]. In this sense, Banksy's maxim 'One Nation Under CCTV' [14] is misleading. We are not all equally subjected to CCTV surveillance; rather, the advent of systems such as those described by SSN provide a new mechanism for categorising people into 'normal' and 'deviant' populations and treating differently those that fall into the latter category. It is often argued that 'innocent (i.e. normal) people have nothing to fear', but the fact is that in a time of global War on Terror the definition of the normal and the deviant can change rapidly and in directions that many of us would not agree with. In addition, besides being used to track people of colour, Muslims, youths wearing hoodies, and so on, CCTV can and has been used to spy on young women, for example by pointing the camera through their bedroom window [15-18].

With these points in mind we could perhaps think of CCTV as an affront to liberal democracy, on the basis that the entire *raison d'être* for liberal democracy is the protection of the private property of the individual including the individual's right to privacy. Alternatively we could draw parallels between CCTV and Foucault's discussion of the Panopticon, a system of social control in which the very awareness of being under surveillance leads the individual to change his or her behaviour, to conform to the norms of society, to manage the self [19]. We could see CCTV as part of the shift from disciplinary societies to societies of control [20], in which "mobility goes hand-in-hand with traceability" such that you can move only if you are willing to leave traces of your position and of what you are doing, whether it be licit or illicit [21]. Whichever way you look at it, we seem to be sleep-walking into a system that nobody has voted for, that does not seem to achieve what the government tell us it will achieve, and that raises important questions about real and ideal relationships between public and private, individual and society, the people and the state.

It would seem that it is time to wake up, to take action. What can you do? 1. For all its limitations, looking at the methodology of the Big Brother Watch report is a start. You can submit Freedom of Information requests. However, Freedom of Information won't help if you want to approach particular private individuals and companies about their usage of CCTV. Here there are other laws which may be usefully deployed; for example, the Data Protection Act 1998 [22, 23] and the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 [24]. 2. CCTV cameras can be destroyed, although this would of course be regarded as a criminal act and consequently this author cannot condone such action. A website exists to provide information on how to do this most effectively and without being caught [25], and Mike Davis offers encouragement [26]. 3. 'Video sniffing' is a term used to describe a methodology of legally hacking CCTV footage [27, 28]. 4. Subvert the cameras by playing to them [29]. 5. We need to initiate a public debate on CCTV. That doesn't mean another review by a government committee, another report by a watchdog organisation like Big Brother Watch, or another newspaper article reacting or responding to one of these reviews or reports. Unless we can start an engagement with the issue that is deeper and more sustained than our Attention-Deficit-Hyperactivity-Disorder media will allow, we are going to keep heading in the same direction we are currently going. One step in the direction of such an engagement would be to organise a public meeting on the issue [30]. 6. Here's another: I will soon be setting up a CCTV wiki to build up information and photos on CCTV, and anyone who wants to add to this is most welcome. 7. There is a protest organised by No Borders Network in January [31].

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