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CCTV: Big Brother or Good Mother.

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The metaphor most used in respect of CCTV cameras is that of "Big Brother", calling to mind the endless surveillance of George Orwell's 1984.

But I want to suggest that an alternative metaphor might be "Good Mother", as a good mother is someone who keeps a watchful eye on her children to ensure that don't get into danger, while at the same time letting them run free.

Models of CCTV

In a study of different approaches to CCTV, Aileen Xenakis outlines the basic ways in which CCTV works.

"CCTV programs are becoming the next stage in law enforcement technology. Police departments have, with increasing frequency, placed agency-owned cameras in public areas and streamed the cameras' video feeds to an observation room, where police department employees can view multiple screens and see multiple areas of the city at the same time."(1)

She outlines two different strategies, one exemplified in Baltimore and one in London.

Baltimore had a CCTV programme with a small number of cameras concentrated in the city's downtown economic and tourism hub. It was well publicised, with large signs in monitored areas, and achieved its goal to discourage crime in those areas, so that tourists would feel safe to shop and dine there. In this respect, it acted as a deterrent, but some critics argued that what it did was to "displace crime", which moved to those areas where there was no CCTV. Of course that depends on the nature of the crime. As far as robbery, violence, mugging were concerned, any reduction in the main tourist hub would be an

advantage. But other activities like drug dealing or burglary and theft would simply be displaced away from the CCTV area to other parts of the city. In this respect CCTV acted rather like a special case of a well-lit street; the crime gravitated to the darker shadows around.

London opted for a different strategy, that of saturation coverage, and has the largest CCTV system in the world, with over 500,000 cameras. As Xenakis notes:

"As a capital city, London employs many cameras in all areas of the city in order to improve situational awareness. The program's extensiveness makes the CCTV program efficient, both cost-wise and in delivering safety, since a government cannot justify investing money and employee efforts in a system that is not large enough to capture the activities that pose a threat. CCTV expenditures and research will be fruitless if government employees use CCTV to observe a crime and then lose their lead as soon as the activity moves out of the scope of the cameras."

London is using CCTV to apprehend criminals as much in a real time situation, as crime arises, as after the event. That's the benefit of saturation coverage. Baltimore, by contrast, is very much a deterrent in that if the criminal is caught on CCTV, enough details may be available to track them down and apprehend them. Witnesses are notoriously bad with recall - height, build, clothing etc - and CCTV provides an extra pair of eyes.

With regards to Jersey, it is unlikely that cost would enable saturation coverage, which means that the main point of CCTV will be to deter criminals, and it should be noted that will undoubtedly cause a displacement of criminal activity away from known CCTV sites.

CCTV and Civil Liberties

There's a fear that CCTV may infringe on civil liberties, and when Washington DC was assessing how to implement its own rules for CCTV, it decided on the following important guideline:

"Government CCTV programs are established by placing cameras on public property--for example, on a lamp post--with a view of public space. Anyone viewing CCTV cameras can only view what a police officer on foot, or any person on the street, would be able to see."

"As technology develops, jurisdictions are able to purchase and place cameras throughout the area with pan-tilt-zoom capabilities, but a properly regulated CCTV program takes into consideration that any information gathered by viewing areas that are not in plain view or in public space would not be able to be used in any sort of a criminal investigation, and would ensure that cameras are not placed in questionable areas."

There's a further aspect of transparency:

"To be even more transparent, the current trend in implementing CCTV program policy is to post publicly that an area is subject to video surveillance. In certain areas of Baltimore, signs are posted in monitored areas, while in Washington, D.C. HSEMA posts all locations of CCTV cameras on its website. HSEMA's program thus allows people to research exactly where cameras are before they leave the house and to be aware of when and where they are monitored."

The Surveillance Society

One of the concerns is that the civil liberties groups have is that if the technology is good enough, then it may invade privacy by allowing intelligence to be gathered on assemblies of people in peaceful protests, or the distribution of political literature, or carrying pamphlets relating to a cause or issue. I think this is a serious concern. The fact that Jersey, for instance, had "Operation Blast" which effectively was a kind of surveillance - filing of information and recording of new information relating to States members. It shows that culture in which a potential misuse of CCTV cameras could well be possible.

"Critics' other constitutional concerns stem from the First Amendment, but CCTV programs should not infringe on these rights either. Certain interest groups have expressed concern that CCTV technology may allow government employees to focus cameras on groups assembling in public places, or zoom in on pamphlets or other literature that people carry, effectively hindering people's willingness to exercise their right to assemble or carry and distribute literature."

New York Civil Liberties Union

The New York Civil Liberties Union came up with some good suggestions to ensure that CCTV would not be abused.

- 1) That there are clear goals and purposes for CCTV programs, such as prevention of crime and that these are subject to periodic audits to ensure that recordings are not being misused
- 2) Public notification of location of cameras so that the community can comment
- 3) A training program so that those monitoring video feeds are properly trained and supervised
- 4) An explicit statement of the recording, storing, and disposal policies for the videos, including the exact length of time permissible to keep a recording
- 5) Regulations to address the circumstances under which recordings will be accessible and disseminated.

The NYCLU report also devotes much attention to what activity would constitute a misuse of CCTV technology, such as zooming in on fliers or pamphlets 'being distributed.

It also "cautions that cameras observe only public areas where people enjoy no reasonable expectation of privacy, and recommends that cameras must not have any audio capabilities. The lack of audio capabilities is very important to agencies designing CCTV programs and for interest groups alike, and must be stated in the regulations, as well as emphasized in town hall meetings and media releases."

It is also noted that regulations should address the sensitive subject of who views the footage and how they do so. The regulations require the certification of all program operators and provide that all operators of the CCTV systems shall sign a certification that they have read and understand the CCTV regulations and acknowledge the potential criminal and/or administrative sanctions for unauthorized use or misuse of the CCTV systems.

CCTV can be a good weapon in the police arsenal against crime, but for the public to have confidence that it is not a case of "Big Brother", it is important that safeguards are put in place. Given proper safeguards, CCTV can be effective as a deterrent and in catching criminals.

A few examples will suffice to demonstrate that:

In 2011 alone, the Met said that 288 robbers, 158 burglars, 57 suspects for serious assaults and 19 people involved in sexual assaults have been identified using CCTV images, and many persistent offenders wanted for theft and anti-social behaviour were also captured (2)

In Bournemouth, in 2012, more than 100 law-breakers were caught on film in Bournemouth over a year by mobile CCTV cameras, which could easily be relocated. Offences detected included assault, kerb-crawling, public order offences, burglary and theft, leading to 124 arrests. They have fixed CCTV cameras, but the mobile cameras can be positioned in any public space and are linked to the town's central CCTV control room at Bournemouth police station (3)

What I think we don't want is the "Internet Eyes" scheme. This is a website which pays the public to monitor live commercial CCTV footage online. It was launched in Devon in 2010, and is still in operation. Nevertheless, it was cautioned in 2012, after an individual found CCTV images of themselves posted on YouTube, which came from the Internet Eyes stream. It was found that their monitoring website did not keep a complete record of its viewers' activities which made it impossible to trace the viewer who posted the clip onto YouTube in the first place. (5) (6)

As the BigBrotherWatch Website points out:

"This sort of website is a deviant's dream, giving armchair snoopers the ability to sit and watch CCTV footage from across the country at their leisure. The people watching these cameras have no training, no legal oversight and have to pay to use the service. We should be asking ourselves what kind of person volunteers to spend their time watching CCTV cameras in shops they have no connection with in the vague hope of winning a prize?" (7)

In conclusion, with the proper safeguards, I would recommend CCTV as a valuable tool in the fight against crime, but only with the right safeguards in place, as outlined above, and monitored by trained staff.

I do not think that a privatised CCTV system (such as "Internet Eyes") can ensure that

such safeguards are in place, and the voyeuristic nature of that practice could result in crimes. If private CCTV is in place as in shops, parking etc, there needs to be a clear code of practice restricting its use, storage and dissemination.

Links

- 1) Washington and CCTV: It's 2010, Not Nineteen Eighty-Four, Aileen Xenakis, Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law. Volume: 42. Issue: 3, 2010
- 2) http://www.london24.com/news/crime/cctv_cameras_help_catch_1_000_london_criminals_1_891388
- 3) http://www.bournemouthcho.co.uk/news/9652301.100_criminals_caught_by_mobile_CCTV_cameras_in_Bournemouth/
- 4) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-11460897>
- 5) <http://www.theiionline.org/2012/01/ico-cautions-internet-eyes-after-cctv-footage-on-youtube/>
- 6) http://www.no-cctv.org.uk/materials/docs/2011_Complaint_Internet_Eyes.pdf
- 7) <http://www.bigbrotherwatch.org.uk/home/2013/01/calling-all-deviants-down-under.html>