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City Watching: closed circuit television surveillance in public spaces

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Summary *In the 1990s closed circuit television (CCTV) surveillance cameras have become a common feature in the public spaces of urban Britain. Drawing on research into city centre CCTV in general and Glasgow's City Watch scheme in particular, this paper examines the phenomenon in terms of the construction of CCTV systems, the limits to their potential effectiveness and the resistance to their development.*

Introduction

In the 1990s closed circuit television (CCTV) surveillance cameras have become an increasingly common feature in the public spaces of towns and cities across Britain. A survey of London boroughs, metropolitan authorities and a sample of district councils in England found that thirty-nine had CCTV cameras in public spaces¹ in 1993 compared with just two in 1987 (Bulos and Sarno 1994). The results of another survey, mapped in Figure 1, showed that by August 1994 seventy nine towns and cities had CCTV, while by March 1995 the figure was over ninety (*The Guardian* 22 March, 1995).

CCTV surveillance cameras are, of course, not new. They have been operating in privately owned (but publicly accessible) spaces such as shopping malls (see, for example, Davis' vivid account of the 'panopticon mall' in Los Angeles, (1990 240–4)) banks and football stadia for several years. But the extension of CCTV from these locations into *publicly owned* urban-space—the streets and squares of town and city centres—raises important questions about such intensive surveillance of spaces which, as Goheen notes, have particular importance as areas where peoples' 'collective rights to performance and speech are entrenched' (Goheen 1994, 431). In this paper we examine three aspects of CCTV surveillance in the public spaces of cities: the local political and economic interests behind its introduction, debate about its effectiveness, and public concern over its development. Before addressing these issues directly, however, we first locate CCTV in a broader historical and theoretical context.

The panoptic dream?

The sight of an individual sitting at a console in front of a bank of TV monitors displaying pictures of the streets of a city centre, using the controls to make cameras pan across a crowded shopping area or zoom in on a group of youths gathered on a street corner, and dispatching police officers to the scene of anything that arouses suspicion, has prompted many comparisons with Orwell's dystopian vision of 'Big Brother' in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. But it is 1791 rather than 1984 which provides a more instructive date for comparison. This was the year Jeremy Bentham published



Figure 1 Town centre CCTV systems in August 1994
Source: Home Office (1994) p 44

plans for a 'Panopticon', a model prison based on an optical-mechanical technique whereby inmates in cells on the periphery of a circular building are always, potentially, under the gaze of an official in a central tower (see Driver 1985; Himmelfarb 1968). Although Bentham's Panopticon was never built in Britain (partly because of state opposition to a prison that Bentham wanted to see run for private profit²), it was a scheme which nevertheless had an 'imaginary intensity' that has given rise to many variations (Foucault 1977, 205) of which CCTV can be seen as one of the most recent.

Drawing on Foucault's discussion of Bentham's Panopticon there are several important parallels with CCTV. Like the Panopticon, CCTV schemes meet Bentham's principle that power should be 'visible and unverifiable'. Visibility is ensured by the fact that just as the inmate of Bentham's prison has constantly 'before his [sic] eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon' (Foucault 1977, 201) so too anybody in Glasgow city centre, for example, can see cameras on top of six metre poles or jutting out from the sides of buildings, while street signs proclaim 'This area is protected by City Watch'. Unverifiability reflects the way in which, just as the inmate in Bentham's scheme never knows 'whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so' (op. cit.), so too anyone in the city centre never knows whether the control room operator is looking at them but always knows that they might be. This pressure of surveillance is particularly effective because like Bentham's Panopticon, CCTV is a mechanism which 'automatizes and disindividualizes power' (Foucault 1977, 202). Power becomes vested not in the surveillance by a particular person, like a police officer, but in the electronic eye of the camera, inducing a 'state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power' (Foucault 1977, 201). The product of such intensive surveillance is, as both Bentham and the proponents of CCTV claim, the deterrent of deviant behaviour and the possibility of rapid intervention at any moment if something suspicious is detected.

The parallels between CCTV systems and Bentham's Panopticon should not, of course, be overdrawn. The Panopticon model and the prisons, schools, workhouses and asylums whose designs drew inspiration from this model are, in contrast to the street, all clearly defined, segregated institutional spaces³. Furthermore, Bentham believed that the introduction of the Panopticon would make it possible to dispense with other forms of constraint whereas CCTV supplements rather than replaces other types of policing. Despite these differences, however, Bentham's panoptic techniques of 'permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance' have, with the introduction of CCTV cameras, infiltrated the public spaces of city centres. Employing CCTV in public spaces raises important theoretical questions about the relationships between civil society and the state. CCTV could be seen from a Foucauldian perspective, for example, as a manifestation of a general expansion of power, as a new component of a disciplinary network, an elaborate political technology for producing obedient individuals in public spaces (Foucault 1977, 214). CCTV might also be seen, however, as reinforcing the infrastructural or administrative power of the state to penetrate and regulate the activities of civil society (see Mann 1984; Giddens 1985; Dandeker 1990; Ogborn 1993). Both perspectives potentially offer insights into the significance of CCTV but both tend to obscure some of the more immediate but nevertheless important questions concerning CCTV which we are interested in here. How, for example, is a panoptic scheme like CCTV constructed? What are the *limits* of CCTV in terms of its effectiveness? And what, if

any, *resistance* is there to CCTV. These three themes are explored in more detail drawing upon research on city centre CCTV in general and on Glasgow's City Watch scheme in particular.

Constructing a modern Panopticon: the development of city centre CCTV

Construction of CCTV surveillance systems in public spaces depends crucially on a strategic alliance between the local state and local private capital. Local state involvement is necessary because of municipal responsibility for the areas that make up the public spaces of city centres in which cameras operate. The high financial costs of installing and running a system, however, mean that individual local councils are unable or unwilling to finance CCTV systems unilaterally. Although some central government finance for local CCTV schemes is now available (*The Guardian* 28 March 1995), local private capital is a vitally important component of most (although not all) city centre CCTV schemes. The construction of a partnership between the local public and private sectors is, however, fraught with tensions because of the way in which CCTV occupies an ambiguous position, both geographically and conceptually, on the boundary between the private and public domains. From the perspective of local councils there are anxieties about committing public funding to a project which may mainly appear to serve the needs of local private commercial interests and which raises sensitive civil libertarian questions about the invasion of privacy. From the perspective of the private sector, however, there is reluctance to contribute to a scheme which is viewed as part of the public urban infra-structure and which should therefore be funded from contributions businesses already make to the public domain through business rates (see Local Government Information Unit 1994).

Glasgow provides an instructive example of the role of local political and economic interests in the development of a city centre CCTV system and the attempted resolution of these public-private tensions. The idea for city centre CCTV originated with the Glasgow Development Agency (GDA), a government 'quango' with a remit for promoting the economic development of the city. Worried that business drift from the city in the early 1990s was partly the product of crime (actual and perceived), GDA presented proposals for CCTV to Glasgow District Council (GDC) and Strathclyde Regional Council (SRC), drawing attention to the positive economic and social impact of CCTV claimed by established schemes elsewhere in Britain. While keen to contribute to crime prevention in the city, both GDC and SRC were concerned about the civil liberties implications of CCTV in the city's public spaces. But these concerns were diffused when GDA demonstrated, first, widespread popular support for the scheme (a public opinion survey revealed 95 per cent of those asked were in favour of CCTV in Glasgow) and, secondly, the involvement of the Scottish Council for Civil Liberties in producing operating guidelines for the system. Although the councils then agreed to give £200,000 to the project, with the GDA contributing a further £100,000, this was far short of the £1.1 million needed to set up and run the scheme for three years. GDA therefore approached city centre businesses for contributions, stressing the financial benefits of the scheme by using the slogan CCTV 'doesn't just make sense—it makes business sense'. On the basis of a public opinion survey, GDA calculated that introducing CCTV would encourage 225,000 more visits to the city a year, creating 1,500 jobs and an additional £40 million of additional income to city centre businesses. The private sector responded by contributing £270,000. While short of GDA's original target this was sufficient to decide to install and run the system for one year. In

Table 1 'Before' and 'After' crime statistics for areas covered by CCTV in Birmingham and Airdrie

	Birmingham	
	Before CCTV (3 months to 3/91)	After CCTV (3 months to 9/91)
Woundings	46	27
Robberies	79	55
Thefts from a person	89	63
Indecency	8	3
Damage	62	80

Source: police data quoted in Birmingham City Centre Development Group (1992, 8)

	Airdrie	
	Before CCTV (12 months to 8/82)	After CCTV (12 months to 8/93)
Car break-ins	480	20
Theft of cars	185	13
Serious assaults	39	22
Vandalism	207	36
Break-ins to commercial premises	263	15

Source: police data quoted in Wills (1993, 13)

November 1994 Glasgow's CCTV scheme, City Watch, went 'live' with thirty two cameras distributed across the city centre, monitored by civilian operators in a control room located in the central police station, and providing twenty-four hour surveillance of the city's main business, commercial, cultural and tourist areas.

'Big Brother' is protecting you? The potential effectiveness of city centre CCTV

Glasgow's City Watch system has two broad aims: to detect and deter crime and, by making people feel safer, increase visits to the city centre. While it is clearly too early to rigorously evaluate the impact of Glasgow's cameras on crime and public use of the city, it is possible to examine existing substantive and conceptual evidence to establish how likely it is that CCTV will realise such aims.

Tackling crime

In planning Glasgow's CCTV system, GDA visited schemes in Birmingham and Airdrie (a market town to the east of Glasgow) both of which provided dramatic evidence of the impact of CCTV on crime. Table 1 shows the police recorded crime statistics for the areas covered by the cameras in Birmingham and Airdrie before and after the installation of CCTV.

While these statistics are impressive, the evaluations on which such dramatic claims are based have been called into question. Reviewing existing evaluations of

CCTV schemes, Short and Ditton conclude they are ‘wholly unreliable’ (Short and Ditton 1995, 10), while Pawson and Tilley describe them as ‘*post hoc* shoestring efforts by the untrained and self-interested practitioner’ (Pawson and Tilley 1994). Several problems have been identified. First, the ‘before’ and ‘after’ time periods are often too short and not matched for time of year. Secondly, the data only relates to crimes reported to and recorded by the police which may not accurately reflect actual changes in crime. Thirdly, the possibility that CCTV has displaced crime to surrounding areas not in view of the cameras is rarely mentioned or studied, and nor are control areas identified to assess comparable changes in crime in places without cameras. Against this background the claims by City Watch that ‘there has been a significant decrease in certain types of criminal activity’ in Glasgow, particularly, counterfeit trading, bag-dipping, pickpocketing, robberies at automatic cash machines, shoplifting and break-ins to commercial premises need to be interpreted cautiously. But claims about decreasing criminal activity through CCTV surveillance need to be interpreted cautiously for theoretical as well as methodological reasons. CCTV is bound up with a ‘master shift’ in the discourse of social control from a concern with the mind (and issues of motivation, thought and intention) to a concern with the body (and issues of observable behaviour) (Cohen 1985). Rather than attempting to tackle crime by investing in the treatment and rehabilitation of offenders, the discourse of ‘new behaviourism’, of which CCTV surveillance is a part, is less interested in the causes of crime than with its prevention, and is less concerned with trying to change social conditions than with the more modest aim of ‘changing behaviour sequences’ (Cohen 1985, 150). From this perspective if CCTV surveillance ‘works’ by reducing crime, it works at the level of deterrence not at the level of causation.

Reviving the city centre

Whatever its impact on crime, city centre CCTV systems are not simply a piece of crime prevention technology. In Glasgow, as elsewhere, the hope is that CCTV will enhance what City Watch calls the ‘feel good factor’ by making people more confident about coming to the city and thus combat what Bianchini (1990) calls the crisis of urban public sociability. Of course, part of this crisis is the product of the fear of crime (as much as the objective risks of crime) and its negative impacts on urban life and culture (see Smith 1989, 279–81). Anecdotal evidence from Glasgow suggests anxiety about coming into the city is already diminishing as a result of City Watch, a representative of one of the city’s shopping malls claiming that ‘people today are demonstrating a positive response to a safer environment which offers additional security to their family and friends’. As with crime and fear of crime reduction, it’s too early to assess these claims rigorously but it is important to recognise that the decline of city centres has a whole variety of causes. The proliferation of out-of-town shopping centres and leisure facilities and the trends towards the domestication and privatisation of social life, such that ‘the cinema and the theatre have long since turned into the home video; the laundrette and the laundry into Arison and Hotpoint’ (Taylor quoted in Bianchini 1990, 4), have all conspired to reduce the significance of old urban centres. Moreover, at a conceptual level both Sennett (1970, 1977) and Giddens (1984) argue that peoples’ search for ‘ontological security’ (a sense of well-being and identity) is increasingly focused on the residential neighbourhood, decreasing the importance of social encounters in the wider, public environment of the city. Against this background, it is unlikely that CCTV on its own can reverse the decline of urban public social life. Indeed, CCTV

may have disbenefits in terms of urban public sociability by increasing bystander indifference and reducing peoples propensity to report incidents to the police. An unwarranted sense of complacency about safety in the city may develop: 'Instead of worrying about 'Big Brother' watching them, the public may perceive that 'Big Father' has sorted everything out' (Groombridge and Murji 1994, 288).

'Revolts against the gaze'? CCTV and civil liberties

Whatever its actual impact, public support for CCTV in public spaces currently appears to be high. It is likely that in Britain this is due to a handful of prominent incidents in which CCTV has played a part in the capture of offenders, such as the two boys leading James Bulger away to his death from the Bootle shopping centre, the two men dropping a bomb in to a dustbin outside Harrods department store in London and the woman walking out of a Nottingham hospital having abducted a baby. A Home Office public attitude survey conducted in various sites with and without CCTV found that 85 per cent of those interviewed in shopping centres, 89 per cent of those in streets and 92 per cent of those in car parks said they welcomed (or would welcome) the installation of CCTV in those sites (Honest and Charman 1992, 12). Similarly, in Glasgow 95 per cent of those asked said they were in favour of CCTV in the city centre; in Airdrie 89 per cent believed CCTV would reduce their fear of crime; and in Sutton in south east London 85 per cent welcomed the introduction of CCTV to the town centre. But such statistics need to be interpreted cautiously. As the Home Office researchers concluded 'public acceptance is based on limited, and partly inaccurate knowledge of the functions and capabilities of CCTV systems in public places' (Honest and Charman 1992, 25). Furthermore, although there appears to be little opposition to CCTV, it would be misleading to conclude that the public is not concerned about its development. Almost three quarters of respondents in the Home Office survey believed that CCTV cameras could easily be abused and used by the 'wrong people' (who these were was not specified) and 38 per cent felt that the people in control of the cameras could not be completely trusted to use them only for the public good (Honest and Charman 1992, 9). In addition fears were expressed that the pressures to demonstrate the effectiveness of having a CCTV system may lead those monitoring the cameras into 'over-scrutinising particular groups—for example young black males, "scruffy people"—without due cause' (Honest and Charman 1992, 8). This fear is echoed by Bianchini (1990) in his concerns about the use of CCTV for the 'moral regulation' of city centres, 'In many city centres', he observes, 'the paramount need to create a safe and attractive environment for shoppers led to the virtual disenfranchisement from city life of young people with low spending power and of other—generally low-income—residents, whose appearances and conduct did not conform to the moral codes of well-ordered consumption enforced by shopping centre managers' (5). Indeed, as Mulgan (1989, 276) suggests, attempts to create a 'convivial milieu' for economic and socio-cultural life in the city using CCTV may become attempts to purify space of those 'troublesome others'—the underclass, the homeless, the unemployed—reducing exposure to what Sennett (1990) calls 'the presence of difference'. The commonly expressed view that the law-abiding have nothing to fear from CCTV has thus been dismissed by Britain's National Council for Civil Liberties as of little comfort to those who already experience discrimination and harassment (Liberty 1989).

Against this background, the operational control of CCTV is vitally important. One of the features of Bentham's Panopticon highlighted by Foucault was its

openness to public scrutiny. As Foucault noted the arrangement whereby ‘an observer may observe, at a glance, so many different individuals, also enables everyone to come and observe any of the observers’ (Foucault 1977, 207). As a result Foucault concludes ‘There is no risk, therefore, that the increase of power created by the panoptic machine may degenerate into tyranny; the disciplinary mechanism will be democratically controlled’ (op. cit.) While most city centre CCTV schemes allow the public access to the control room so they can ‘observe the observers’, this is clearly not a sufficient condition for making schemes formally accountable to the local community. Nor are operational guidelines, however strict, a substitute for the local democratic accountability of CCTV systems, particularly where monitoring the implementation of such guidelines lies, as in Glasgow, with an employee of the public-private sector partnership responsible for running the system. The ‘democratic deficit’ associated with local governance organisations (agencies responsible for the provision and management of local public services, see Kearns 1995) is clearly a characteristic of city centre CCTV systems, including Glasgow, where both the operational control and strategic management of the system are the responsibility of non-elected bodies.

Conclusions

Our lives are increasingly under the gaze of surveillance cameras as their use extends from the private spaces of shopping malls and banks, into residential spaces such as local authority housing schemes, and now into city centres. And the diffusion of CCTV surveillance is set to continue. The British Government has recently published a manual, *CCTV—Looking out for you* (Home Office 1994)—a title evoking both the protective and detective functions of CCTV on how to set up CCTV surveillance cameras in public spaces and is providing £5 million of grants for the installation of cameras in town centres, shopping centres, car parks and business parks (*The Guardian* 28 March 1995). Such support for CCTV is partly a faith in its crime reducing effects, but it also reflects the way CCTV fits neatly with both the neo-liberal and neo-conservative dimensions of the New Right law and order policy. CCTV shifts responsibility for controlling crime and undertaking policing from the central state and onto local civil society *and* it enhances the state’s ability to penetrate and control civil society (see Fyfe 1995 and in press). This is of theoretical as well as political importance. Returning to our opening remarks, it suggests the relevance of CCTV to both a Foucauldian concern with an expanding disciplinary network and the interests of Michael Mann (and others) with the infrastructural power of the state. Fears about the potential threat to civil liberties of this increase in state power are routinely dismissed in current political rhetoric. ‘Closed circuit cameras have proved they can work’ asserted Prime Minister John Major speaking to the 1994 Conservative Local Government Conference, and went on: ‘I have no doubt we will hear some protest about a threat to civil liberties. Well, I have no sympathy whatsoever for so-called liberties of that kind’ (quoted in Groombridge and Murji 1994, 283). The confidence articulated here in the role of CCTV has intriguing historical echoes. Jeremy Bentham was supremely confident in his panoptic scheme: it is ‘a great and new instrument of government . . . ; its great excellence consists in the great strength it is capable of giving to *any* institution it may be thought proper to apply it’ (Bentham quoted in Foucault 1977, 206). But is it proper to apply CCTV to public spaces and who decides whether it is proper or not? Rather than focusing on narrow operational questions about effectiveness, the development of

CCTV therefore needs to be set in its political context. But there are also key economic questions given our earlier remarks about the funding of city centre CCTV and the fact that CCTV is now big business with an estimated £300M spent on video surveillance a year. Finally, there are important social issues bound up with CCTV. Groombridge and Murji warn that the massive expansion of CCTV will yield public indifference to the world around them: no one will care what they see on the streets 'as they move about . . . head down' (1994, 289) because they will assume someone else is watching. Similarly, Seabrook (1993, 12) writing about the Bulger case comments: 'What kind of security do cameras provide? Surely if Bootle really were a close-knit community it would have no need of cameras. Security, if it arises from anywhere, must arise from the tenderness and vigilance of people committed to the daily protection of one another'. Resorting to cameras as a technocratic solution to a social problem may therefore have disturbing social consequences. Indeed, as Julius observed the panoptic principle is much more than architectural ingenuity: it is an event in the 'history of the human mind. In appearance, it is merely the solution of a technical problem; but through it a whole type of society emerges' (quoted in Foucault 1977, 216).

Notes

- 1 In this study public space was defined as 'one to which normally people have unrestricted access and right of way' (Bulos and Sarno 1994, 7).
- 2 We are grateful to one of the referees for bringing this to our attention.
- 3 Foucault emphasises that the disciplinary techniques associated with panopticism do not necessarily depend on confinement or spatial segregation and can thus operate outside closed institutions; see Driver 1994, 128.

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