Tracking offenders by satellite – progress or cost-cutting?

Mike Nellis is concerned about the effect of satellite technology on the supervision of offenders.

The satellite tracking of offenders using GPS and GSM mobile phone technology began in the USA in 1997. By 2004 - when the 17-month English pilots began - it had been used in 32 states. It has been piloted (briefly) in Bavaria and also in New Zealand, France and the Netherlands (see Elzinga and Nijboer 2006). Nova Scotia has been experimenting with it since spring 2006, and in September 2007 a pilot will start in Manitoba, Canada. It is probably too early to say what the future holds in regard to satellite tracking, but some insight into its significance and possible trajectory, might be gained from looking at the new fields of 'surveillance studies' and 'mobility studies'.

The surveillance of mobility – of people, artefacts and information – has become an established area of sociological enquiry, with a wide-ranging focus (Molz 2006). As yet, few theoretical insights from mobility studies have been assimilated into criminology, possibly because there has been only limited criminological interest in offenders 'on the move'. The satellite tracking of offenders seems very novel to criminology, and even more so to many professionals involved in traditional forms of offender supervision such as probation or community service.

Satellite tracking exemplifies the surveillance of mobility, insofar as it involves the automated monitoring (and sometimes restriction) of convicted criminals' routine and everyday movements in limited spatial settings – quite often poor neighbourhoods – and the transfer of digitised data, including digitised maps, between a range of criminal justice agencies. It cannot, however, be understood merely as an isolated and self-contained development in criminal justice; rather it bears out Bennett and Regan's (2004:450) observation that 'the spaces in which the surveillance of mobilities regularly occurs [has] expand[ed] beyond those that are arguably hubs of mobility, such as airports, and now extend[s] *to any space in which people, objects or words move*' (emphasis added). It uses technical systems which have been created for military intelligence, transport control (vehicle, boat and plane tracking, and the as yet rare road tolling systems) and facilitates cellphone communication to track mobile individuals, as, in different ways, do CCTV systems and the audit trails left by digitised financial transactions.

'With the surveillance of mobilities there is potentially no 'hiding'. There is no room to walk anonymously down a street, drive through a neighbourhood, or talk on the phone. All these movements and flows are subject to scrutiny, captured, stored, manipulated and subsequently used for purportedly benevolent or underhandedly sinister purposes. The objects we use (cars, phones, computers, electricity) in turn become tools for surveillance. Movement is not a means of evading surveillance but has become the object of surveillance.' (Bennett and Regan 2004:453).

These, of course, are the routine experiences of ordinary citizens, whose immersion in such systems demonstrates a mixture of casual assent, begrudging acquiescence and active desire. Given the affordances of the technologies available, and the likely future direction of such technologies, it was arguably only a matter of time before specific and sophisticated forms of mobility monitoring were applied to those about whom there was probable cause for suspicion, fear or hostility. As Hannam, Scheller and Urry (2006:1) put it 'fear of illicit mobilities and their attendant security risks increasingly determine the logics of governance and liability protection within both the public and private sectors'. Thus, while many citizens will choose *voluntary locatability* for their own convenience and security, some citizens will have *enforced locatability* imposed on them, using variants of the very same technologies.

The concept of tracking offenders by satellite crystallised within specific crime control discourses, developed by rising elites within an evolving 'commercial-corrections complex' (Lilly and Knepper 1993) – and was further aided by straightforwardly political and media discourses about the *failure and inadequacy* of existing humanistic forms of offender supervision in the community.

It is against the backcloth of an existing, multiple-use technological infrastructure that the emergence of satellite tracking must be understood. Mobile communication and geolocation technologies enable connectivity across space in ways that produce a sense of human proximity without the element of physical presence that would once have been required; they facilitate 'new ways of organising the spatial scale and temporal rhythms of interaction' (Scheller 2004:42). Within criminal justice, the spectrum of electronic monitoring (EM) technologies – house arrest/curfew tagging, voice verification and now satellite tracking – are just such means of connectivity, and are aptly thought of as 'automated *socio*-technical systems' (Lianos and Douglas 2000) because, despite being defined by their *technological* nature, a human element remains (at least for now).

It is said of 'virtual communication' that it sustains a sense of relationship, solidarity and community among spatially dispersed networks of people. But EM merely facilitates data gathering *about* someone rather than knowledge *of* someone, and it entails a dyadic link between a single (or split) authority (law enforcement agency/monitoring centre) and a subject, rather than multiple links within a network. One of the paradoxes of satellite tracking offenders – given the vast global reach of GPS – is that the degree of spatial separation between authority and subject may not be great: it is relatively local, parochial, behaviours which are being monitored and regulated. While the monitoring centre itself may be hundreds of miles away from the monitored subject, police and probation officers involved in the broader supervision programme are likely to be in the same neighbourhood.

Virtual communication technologies have created 'economies of presence' (Mitchell 1999) where the accomplishment of a

usually) some approximation to it – that no personal supervisor could manage and that no traditionally-oriented social work or law enforcement agency could afford. This quality of incessance has become, quite literally, a major 'selling point' of satellite tracking, dominating commercial advertisements for it (and indeed other monitoring technologies).

US company iSECUREtrac, for example, plays directly on probation officers' anxieties with the headline: 'Do you know your offenders are compliant when they're way from home? – We check every 10 seconds!' – followed by 'iSECUREtrac' GPS systems offer you the truth. You can hold your offenders accountable to the places they've been and the times they've been there, 24/7/365, anywhere in the world. Additionally GPS tracking systems can greatly increase your level of offender supervision without adding to officer workload. iSECUREtrac alone can provide you with location and compliance verification every 10 seconds, fastest violation reporting on the market, user-friendly, yet powerful, web-based software; proven GPS policies and best practice for agencies' (see illustration). (*Journal of Offender Monitoring*, 19(2), 2007)

Marketing a full case management package, Syscon dispels anxieties about offenders' nocturnal activities with a picture of a contentedly sleeping probation officer who rests easy because 'at work he is using Syscon's automated systems to manage his low risk caseload with a range of kiosk, voice recognition and GPS technologies handling report-ins, the collection of fines, fees and restitution, and secure monitoring - all wrapped up in a fully integrated system. Only Syscon can offer you the full service package from end to end.' (*Journal of Offender Monitoring*, 19(2), 2007).

Sadly, he doesn't know that his computer-printed redundancy notice is coming in the morning post.

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particular social task can now be subject to routine cost-benefit analysis. The emergence of EM, which is often justified by its low cost relative to imprisonment, strikingly illustrates the way in which 'economies of presence' are migrating from the commercial field where they originated directly to the offender supervision field thereby transforming what is meant by 'supervision'. The periodic meeting up of supervisor and supervisee was once integral to the very meaning of supervision; it was via their structured personal encounters (and sometimes through the relationship which grew between them) that an impact on behaviour was effected. Remote monitoring technologies have enlarged the spatial range over which supervisory influence can be exerted – even house arrest/curfew and tagging added a surveillant means of gaining compliance with a court order or release licence as opposed to the incentive-based, trust-based and threat-based means of gaining compliance which have traditionally comprised the social work/law enforcement repertoire.

However, even more importantly, remote monitoring technologies have extended the *temporal range* of supervision within a given 24-hour period. In the past, the most intensive forms of personalised, humanistic supervision have rarely been more than intermittent, daytime encounters, while curfew tagging only added in an element of control over night-time activities. Both approaches leave offenders with significant periods of time when they are without the oversight of supervisors, when their whereabouts are *uncertain*. It is the temporality of satellite tracking that most distinguishes it from humanistic and relational forms of offender supervision, because it seemingly makes possible *incessant oversight* – round the clock knowledge of an offender's location, in real-time or (more