

A lesson in how not to spy on your community?

Imran Awan discusses how the balance between security and intrusion has undermined community relations.

In Birmingham the impact of counter-terrorism legislation and its operation on the Muslim community has led to a community that does not trust the police force. The West Midlands Police force was so concerned with the terrorist threat that it decided to install secret covert and overt cameras. The thinking surely was that the police could use these cameras to spy upon a community and help prevent another 7/7.

The fact Washwood Heath and Sparkbrook are predominately Muslim areas means fundamentally that the police thought the fight against Al-Qaeda had now reached the streets of Birmingham. Yet it appears the cameras have had a counter-productive effect, further fuelling the risk that some members of the local community may now turn to extremism with the initiative, known as Project Champion, becoming a key part in terrorist propaganda. Many questions remain unanswered. For example, what will be the long-term impact of this event on the Muslim families? Will it lead to a community becoming isolated from wider British society? Has it had the result of radicalising those concerned, leading to extremism within this local community?

Between September 2001 and March 2008, there were over 1,500 people arrested under counter-terrorism legislation, a third were charged but only one in eight people convicted (Home Office, 2009). This has led to claims within these communities that the police tactics

are both heavy handed and counter-productive.

With a number of high profile police raids in Birmingham since the creation of counter-terrorist laws, there is a sentiment of distrust and resentment. The fear is that this could pave the way for further extremism within these communities. For example, since 'Operation Gamble' which involved a series of police raids in 2007 in the Alum Rock area of Birmingham, aimed at foiling a terrorist plot to behead a British Muslim soldier (Guardian Press Association, 2008), the local community feels their reputation has been tarnished and believe they are perceived as supporting, condoning and nurturing terrorism.



Spying on the community?

The previous government had stated that the strategic key was 'winning hearts and minds'. Enlisting the support of these local communities is crucial in the fight against extremism. However these raids, and the subsequent CCTV surveillance, have caused further damage as the community has a deep mistrust of the police and counter-terrorism legislation.

Although these specific areas have had a high rate of people charged with terrorist offences, for example in Small Heath, Alum Rock, Sparkbrook and the wider area of the West Midlands, this can in itself not justify the disproportionate use of such surveillance. There was a real opportunity for West Midlands Police to engage and promote a mutual understanding after 7/7 and develop the West Midlands as a place of understanding and tolerance. However, that opportunity was lost when the police forgot their role as custodians for justice and instead became the villains of peace.

There is no single pathway to extremism; instead there are factors from socio-ethnic to cultural reasons. One key factor is ideology enshrined in political grievances and a mistaken understanding of Islam. However, the CCTV cameras installed in Sparkbrook and Washwood Heath will mean there is now a grave fear that some Muslim youth may turn to extremism because of anger, alienation and dissatisfaction from British society.

Under Project Champion (working with Safer Birmingham Partnership, Birmingham City Council and other agencies), the areas were to be monitored by a network of 218 cameras, including 72 hidden ones. The cameras were put up, it was claimed, to tackle all forms of crime, predominately in Muslim suburbs in the Washwood Heath and Sparkbrook area. The Muslim people in this community come from a culture where they do not like to complain, and they do not have any expectations that things should be better with policing. This is precisely why critics argue that West Midlands Police targeted this community because of its vulnerabilities (how wrong they were!). All this has achieved is to further alienate a community already antagonised by the Government's 'Prevent' strategy.

The covert cameras formed what is known as a 'ring of steel', which means local residents' every move was being tracked. There was no formal consultation over the scheme, and local councillors who were briefed about the cameras said they

Photo courtesy of Melinda Kerrison

were deceived into believing they were to tackle anti-social behaviour. The cameras in actual fact were paid for by the Terrorism and Allied Matters fund, administered by the Association of Chief Police Officers.

It has long been argued that CCTV surveillance is an infringement of privacy and civil liberty, but by the same token is a key tool in tackling the fear crime. At the same time serious questions have been raised about CCTV's effectiveness in preventing serious crime (Gill and Spriggs, 2005). Moreover, it has been argued that CCTV could fall foul of simply targeting a specific community disproportionately resulting in a clear breach of privacy laws (Scarman Centre, 2005).

Project Champion has been abandoned for now but the cameras remain – with bags over them – and have left a dark cloud hanging over local residents who feel they have been unfairly targeted. A recent damning report of the project, conducted by Sarah Thornton, Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police, revealed how members of the police force operated in what can only be described as mafia style policing. The report highlights how there was a 'storyline' and a baseless 'narrative' in order to conceal the real truth behind the cameras (Thornton, 2010). The report makes a point in arguing that police officers had 'misled' the local community and local community leaders on the true nature of the use of these cameras. What is even more worrying is that West Midlands Police failed to comply with CCTV Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 and the legal regulatory framework (Thornton, 2010).

It was clear the cameras were there for much more than fighting crime or anti-social behaviour, as was initially suggested, and were used as a mechanism to spy on the Muslim community. West Midlands Police have had to publicly apologise for getting it 'badly wrong' (*The Telegraph*, 2010), but the lasting damage they have caused between community relations has made gathering intelligence for the police even more problematic than ever before.

With the police force now facing a possible legal challenge under the European Convention on Human Rights, there is a real sense that there is still more litigation on the way. Although there is a public review currently under way, the Chief Constable of West Midlands Police has stated his desire to remove the cameras; however I would argue that police will continue to use the cameras in another form, namely for tackling normal crime.

Amidst the storm of controversy surrounding the CCTV cameras, West Midlands Police have further exacerbated the potential for ethnic bias against the Muslim community through the use of gunshot location technology. The technology, known as Shot Spotter, is used to prevent gun-related crime and has been successful across the United States, but the pilot scheme (Project Safe and Sound) now being run in Birmingham could have wider reverberations across the city for community relations. The system has acoustic sensors that, over an area of 25 miles, can locate gunfire and then use audio information and video to capture a suspect or the scene of the crime. The technology will collect information and actual recording clips, which are dispatched to communication centres and the local police force.

There is once again a perception that the police are unfairly targeting the Muslim community as they did with the CCTV debacle, leaving many questions unanswered. For example, where will the sensors be deployed? What do they look like? And more crucially this time, will the police consult with the Muslim community about their views? Critics argue the technology (which costs over £150,000) is another attempt by the state to spy on 'innocent' communities who may not be involved in gun-related crime but caught up by Birmingham's war zone image. The problem for West Midlands Police is managing two polarising views; on the one hand the technology is being used to prevent a serious crime and, on the other hand, the scheme will stigmatise a community as the technology will be deployed in

predominately Muslim areas (namely, Aston and Handsworth).

Building trust is the only way to win hearts and minds but the cameras have only caused more damage to a fragile relationship. West Midlands Police now have the unenviable task of trying to restore the community's trust. The police must now repair some of that damage caused by engaging with grass roots, and by visiting local community members and Mosque's (considered places of tolerance and an agent for the community). The policing pledge in the West Midlands is in tatters, and in order for the police to change that perception it will mean reaching out to thousands of people, by admitting mistakes were made, but also building trust again as this could provide a key tool in preventing seeds of extremism and isolation developing as a result of the 'spycam' saga. ■

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