



OBSCURED BY CAMERAS?

CCTV and Policing

CCTV cameras have crept into virtually every aspect of our lives. In so far as there has been any public debate about its spread the main issue has been taken to be concern about civil liberties. It is not a concern which worries the Home Office minister David Maclean: 'This (CCTV) is a friendly eye in the sky. There is nothing sinister about it and the innocent have nothing to fear. It will put criminals on the run and the evidence will be clear to see' (in *The Times*, 6 July 1994). Research funded by the Home Office seems to show that the public are generally not concerned about the threat to liberties either (Honest and Charman, 1992).

Our purpose here is not to rehearse the civil liberties arguments, though they are important (see Liberty, 1989), but to call into question the 'success' of CCTV. As the Minister's quote shows, the value of CCTV is largely taken for granted. But many of the claims for CCTV have been based more on political and commercial hype than on methodologically sound research. Moreover, the high political and commercial profile of CCTV means that other outcomes are not looked for. These outcomes might include loss of public support for the police or increased surveillance of the police themselves.

This piece is based on our experience of attempting to evaluate the impact of CCTV in one city centre area in London during 1993-94. We had access to police and local authority reports about the scheme, discussions with the local police about another proposed CCTV installation in the same borough and the early figures about the operation of another scheme.

Nothing breeds success like...

The commercial interest behind CCTV is clear. One estimate is that 300,000 security cameras are sold every year and that the annual spend on video surveillance is £300 million (Bulos, 1994). The same source also indicates the spread of CCTV. A national survey of councils reveals that nearly half of all metropolitan and non-metropolitan councils already have CCTV systems in use.

Given the high political profile of crime issues, all parties have an interest in 'talking up' and claiming a share of the success of CCTV. Indeed in our city centre area the majority party on the local authority used the CCTV scheme during the borough elections in 1994 as an example of their success in combating crime. The successes seem apparent to police

officers too. For instance, Chief Inspector Graeme Pearson of Strathclyde Police said that in an area of Airdrie total crime had fallen from 1,218 to 324 and thefts from cars reduced from 237 to 11 (*The Guardian*, 16 April 1993). At this rate CCTV would leave many police officers with little more to do than monitor the cameras or follow up incidents recorded by the cameras. Moreover, as Superintendent Howard Parry of Merseyside Police has observed: 'This system (CCTV) is like 20 officers on duty, 24 hours a day who take a note of everything, never take a holiday and are very rarely off sick' (*The Times*, 6 July 1994). In our area the only sceptical note we encountered was from one Chief Superintendent who felt he was being 'bounced' into installing CCTV simply because the neighbouring divisions had it.

None the less there is some reliable evidence for the effectiveness of CCTV in some circumstances. For example, Chatterton (1993) shows the success of CCTV in reducing the incidence of burglaries and attempts (particularly burglary by artifice) in sheltered housing. Tilley (1993) concludes that car crime can be reduced from car parks using CCTV but that it is not always clear why this has occurred, that the effect wanes with time but may be reinforced with periodic (over) statement of success. Publicity can form a useful part of a strategy but like CCTV itself it cannot be a substitute for a strategy.

It is our argument that many CCTV schemes do not form part of a strategy but are the strategy. For instance, the stated objectives of our city centre CCTV scheme were to tackle (a) robberies from Asian women at bus stops, and (b) car crime. Yet the monitoring reports on the scheme mention neither of these offences, instead they rely on anecdotes about how useful CCTV was for traffic management and for tracking offenders who had been identified through ordinary policing and subsequently moved into the cameras' view.

Believe the hype

One largely unexamined outcome of CCTV is the danger that the public will believe that the cameras work and so may feel that there is a reduced need to provide information to the police. Since crime detection and solution depends substantially on the public, the effect of reduced cooperation could be considerable. Instead of worrying about 'Big Brother' watching them, the public may perceive that 'Big Father' has sorted everything

out. When this turns out not to be the case (poor quality pictures, inoperative cameras and lost tapes), it may add to public cynicism about the police efficiency and legitimacy.

Not only does CCTV disempower the public: it may disempower and de-skill police officers who become appendages of the latest technology, forever watching the screen. Is this really a job for the police at all? The Home Office's inquiry into core police tasks might begin to ask. The problem may not be that when the whole country is under CCTV surveillance but that no one will care what they see on the streets as they move about them head down, nor will their 'guardians' be watching on the screens. What will be the next 'techno-fix' when CCTV no longer delivers its current 'success'?

The danger of the inflated claims is that they present the success of CCTV as self-evident, without awaiting any proper evaluation of its impact. As we have seen there are a variety of powerful interest groups who have a stake in the success of CCTV. In the process, both the police and the public find CCTV installations outstripping their capacity to keep up. There has been evidence for the effectiveness of CCTV only in enclosed locations which are quite unlike the open street surveillance cameras. Perhaps the greatest success of CCTV may be to reassure politicians and police that they have 'done something about crime'; worse still it may have persuaded everyone else that it has. Ironically, those whom CCTV is intended to deter or catch are the ones likely to have least to fear from the 'friendly eye in the sky'.

References

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