

Lights Camera Action

Closed-circuit television in the surveillance society

The adjective "Orwellian" has entered the English lexicon as a universal shorthand for anything repressive or totalitarian, whose etymology is derived from George Orwell's bibliography; most notably the dystopian novel *1984* that first coined "Big Brother": a term synonymous in common usage for personifying mass surveillance [especially at state level], abusive government, disinformation, encroachment and erosion of liberty. It is thought likely that Orwell, having submitted his novel in December of 1948, may have drawn inspiration from the Second World War for the story [the initial draft was called *The Last Man In Europe*]. The idea behind the book title is enigmatic; however, one theory postulates a reversal of the date, with 1948 becoming 1984 as a hypothesis. As regards the plot, it is akin to befitting despotic regimes, such as the Kim dynasty's grip on power in North Korea, where tyranny permeates daily the lives of its citizens. In popular culture, George Orwell's legacy is perceived as highlighting the importance of resisting mass control and oppression, whose message rings true for a cross-section of society that stands opposed to the proliferation of closed-circuit television (CCTV).

In 1942, at a rocket testing facility in Peenemünde in wartime Nazi Germany, the first CCTV system was reportedly installed by Siemens AG and overseen by Walter Bruch who engineered and designed the system, with the intent of observing the launches of V-2 rockets and tracking possible malfunctions. It would take a further twenty-seven years before CCTV saw its deployment in urban areas when, in 1969, police cameras were installed in the New York City Municipal Building near City Hall. The practice soon spread to other cities; not least to London where the concentration of CCTV is at its highest worldwide. The same argument is valid for the United Kingdom per capita.

The British Security Industry Authority (BSIA) estimated in 2013 that there are up to 5.9 million closed-circuit television cameras, thus comprising one surveillance camera for every eleven people in Britain. Another study posits that the average Londoner is captured daily on camera three hundred times. It may be either by local authorities or by private security companies. If by the former, the cameras are most likely operated and monitored by the police and fitted in and around public spaces. If by the latter, the practice comes with certain caveats; namely that the private security industry is much unregulated in Britain, which puts into question the appropriateness of private security companies monitoring CCTV footage. Historically, such workers are on low pay, lack motivation, lack discipline, have a below par work ethic, may sleep on duty, et cetera; while also display a proclivity for targeting people who are young, male, who dress in particular ways and are of ethnic minorities, and use a biased and highly stereotypical set of assumptions about what actions constitute criminal activity and misdemeanours.

According to a 2014 report submitted by the British Standards Institution (BSI Group) on behalf of the Gerrard/Thompson study, published in 2011, the quantity of privately owned CCTV devices outstrips publicly owned and government funded infrastructure. The scope of surveillance technology transcends the parameters of public urban space. In addition to surveillance cameras erected on street poles, CCTV can now be seen in all modes of public transportation, from buses to trains, to taxis, airplanes and vessels. Also not beyond the purview are public toilets and fitting rooms at department stores.

British society is statistically the most surveyed, monitored, inspected, targeted, filed and cross-referenced in Western Europe, and it has endured the invasion of its privacy to a degree that would once have seemed feasible only in science fiction. CCTV rose exponentially in Britain in 1994, necessitated by the need to fight crime and terrorism. Public opinion in favour of surveillance was shaped in part by the torture and murder of James Bulger, a 2-year old toddler who had been abducted from a shopping mall in Bootle, Merseyside, by two 10-year old truants, Robert Thompson and Jon Venables. CCTV was also influential in deterring the Irish Republican Army (IRA) from further acts of terrorism, whose leadership declared a ceasefire, and a cessation of hostilities, effective as of 31 August, 1994, after 25 years of armed conflict in Northern Ireland.

With the IRA turning its efforts to politics through the 1998 Good Friday Agreement via its political arm, Sinn Féin, and, formally declaring an end to a 36-year campaign of 'armed struggle' on the 28th of July, 2005, a succession of British governments set about finding new arguments to justify the rising expenditure on CCTV infrastructure; typically doing so by emphasising advantageous benefits derived from the technology such as e.g. assisting in post-events investigations, serving as evidence to bring about convictions, and, deterring mindful others from vandalism through its overt exposure. Whilst the consensus is that CCTV can be useful in cases like shoplifting or burglary, critics raise the point that CCTV manifests little alteration in crime rate, insufficiently provides for net benefits to society to justify the investments and invasion of privacy, and augments crime levels elsewhere by shifting criminal activity to alternative areas. Such views are backed up by a 2009 Scotland Yard report revealing that CCTV barely solves one crime for every one thousand generated in areas affecting Greater London.

The Home Office [Britain's interior ministry] commissioned a study in 2002 entitled: *Home Office Research Study 252*. The study reviewed a total of 22 surveys regarding the effectiveness of deploying CCTV for crime prevention. The evaluations were thus carried out in three main settings: (1) city centre/public housing; (2) public transport; (3) public car parks. 11 of the 22 included evaluations had found a desirable effect on crime. 5 had found an undesirable effect on crime. 5 had found a null effect on crime (i.e., clear evidence of no effect). The remainder was classified as having an uncertain effect on crime, with inconclusive results returned (i.e., unclear evidence of an effect).

Public perception on heightened surveillance has gradually mellowed with the times, as people grew accustomed to being exposed on camera (whether in a public space or within the confines of one's own living quarters) as a part of life and modern culture. Fashionable trends in television broadcasting, in the proliferation of reality television, in such programmes as John de Mol's franchise 'Big Brother', have nurtured a culture of voyeurism, of exhibitionism, instilled consent and fostered a state of normalization. The aforementioned process was further infused by modern trends in lifestyle choices, in technological innovations made in cell phones, and such mobile devices which now come equipped with built-in cameras as standard, in the means of interaction between people communicating virtually on the internet across web platforms, like WhatsApp, Viber and Skype, and social media websites, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The impact thereof renders a shift in social norms, from prey to predator, wherein the participation of camera exposure becomes an act of voluntary compliance, to such an extent that it ingrains behavioural patterns in societies, whose psyches are conditioned to disregard certain details (which otherwise should draw the attention of passers-by) as banal and trivia, thereby expediting an oblivious transition to a surveillance society.