

Proliferation and social effects of video surveillance systems

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Abstract: My Ph.D. research seeks to reflect upon the impact of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) on the private sphere. It explores the meaning and significance of the term *privacy* in the light of the intensive and sustained development of the digital infrastructures of modern societies. Particularly it analyses the rapid introduction and diffusion of Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) surveillance systems in public places. Nowadays the technology of visual surveillance is relatively cheap and accessible to a broad segment of consumers. CCTV are deployed for a variety of risk management purposes and are used in both public and private settings. They are considered as an important tool in deterring burglary, vandalism, assault, car theft and in combating anti-social behaviour, such as littering, unauthorised access, urinating in public, traffic violations, obstruction, and drunkenness. The lives of ordinary people are becoming increasingly transparent but, unfortunately, there are very few studies about the consequences of surveillance cameras. The rapid spatial and social expansion of CCTV makes the analysis of their implications for public space very important. My Ph.D. project, based on a qualitative study, aims at understanding the social effects of CCTV. It explore what people know about CCTV, how they experience CCTV in relation to their everyday life, and how they feel about the impacts CCTV may have on their own behaviour.

Keywords: Surveillance, Privacy, CCTV

Doctoral Workshop

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My Ph.D. research seeks to reflect upon the impact of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) on the private sphere. It takes place in the reflections about the continuous growth of electronic portraits of individuals, which is a serious problem generated by the adoption of a vast range of new hi-tech devices (Rodotà, 2004; Lyon, 2002, 2005; Van Dijk, 1999).

The widespread diffusion of modern communication networks on a global scale, the proliferation of human practices involving these networks, the development of new digital media that support a wide range of social relationships, the increasing use of new tools of self-publication available on the internet (like YouTube, MySpace, Wordpress, etc.) and the trend toward computerising and networking everyday objects are blurring the boundary between private life and public life (Ball, 2003; Haggerty, 2005; Koskela, 2003; Simon, 2005). A large number of new ICTs makes it possible to track users' information flows and to collect even more kinds of data about people (e.g.: a detailed profile of personal taste, the location of a person at all times, etc.), even when they are not directly aware that they are interacting with or being sensed by it. These processes of data classification, gathering and recording are in rapid expansion. According to Katz (2001: 96):

“Understanding and ‘exposing’ the ways that things, people, and social relations are made visible or invisible to the public eye remains an important political project”.

The main corpus of theoretical and historical analysis to which I will refer is Foucault's analysis of the Panopticon, an architectural plan meant to impose order on the lives of criminals and madmen. This plan, designed by English philosopher Jeremy Bentham at the

end of the eighteenth century, was annular and included a semi-circular building with several individual prison cells visible from a surveillance tower located at the centre of the semicircle. The observation tower allowed all inmates to be visible, while prisoners never knowing whether or not they were being watched or even if there was anyone in the tower. The main effects of the Panopticon were the internalisation of discipline and the voluntary subordination of individuals. In this way the automate functioning of power was assured.

Nowadays the panoptic principle of observation has been extended through pervasive information systems which serve to identify and classify whole populations. Panopticon control affects individuals, both as consumers and as citizens, so much that the need to understand and protect personal privacy in sophisticated information systems is becoming even more critical.

My project is focused on video surveillance devices. Nowadays the technology of visual surveillance is relatively cheap and accessible to a broad segment of potential consumers (Norris, 1998; Wood, 2003). CCTV (Closed-Circuit Television) cameras are becoming an increasing feature of our daily lives. They can be found in most urban street, town squares, banks, schools, universities, hospitals, shopping centres, stores and offices, as well as in many car parks, in public transport systems, in railway stations and airports. Video surveillance systems are deployed for a variety of risk management purposes and are used in both public and private settings. In the “surveillance” narrative they are considered as an important tool in deterring burglary, vandalism, assault, car theft and in combating anti-social behaviour, such as littering, unauthorised access, urinating in public, traffic violations, obstruction, and drunkenness (Norris, McCahill et Wood, 2004). Public bodies and security forces increasingly make use of sophisticated video surveillance devices which may be combined with face or number plate recognition techniques.

Video surveillance systems are technologies that hold out the promise of helping to solve certain social problem, but their use in turn can raise new issues and can create new challenges to privacy.

The goals of my Ph.D. research are: to explore the social effects of ever-increasing video-surveillance; to investigate what people know about CCTV, how they experience CCTV in relation to their everyday life, and how they feel about the impacts CCTV may have on their own behaviour; to explore the meaning and significance of the term *privacy* in the light of these new hi-tech developments and to understand the possible social consequences of the ‘erosion’ of public space in private sphere.

The empirical research is based on a qualitative study. The main focus is on individual perceptions, feeling, opinions and guesses of citizen.

A survey will be conducted in the Italian towns and city-centres. Field work will start on November 2008 and will end on December 2009. It will take place in publicly accessible spaces such as city streets, squares, parks and places for public transport. The interviews will be based on a standardized questionnaire with some open question. The main topics addressed will be: attitudes towards and opinions on video-surveillance systems, behaviours towards CCTV and familiarity with the places where CCTV is installed.

Under “the gaze without eyes” of these systems, the lives of ordinary people are becoming increasingly transparent but, unfortunately, there are very few empirical studies and investigations about the consequences of surveillance cameras. Usually this technology is presented by the media as an effective device of both detection and deterrence and few and rare questions are raised about civil liberties and privacy implications (Gallagher, 2004). In this scenario, the rapid spatial and social expansion of CCTV makes the analysis of their implications for private sphere very important.

Most of the research on CCTV systems is British (see “National CCTV Strategy”, “The impact of CCTV: fourteen case studies” and “Assessing the impact of CCTV” by Home Office Crime Reduction and Community Safety Group, Online report available on <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds>), probably because video surveillance systems have grown most dramatically in Britain over the last years. I will carried out my research in Italy so to expand the research area by examining the Italian case and to compare through empirical data the results from researches carried out in Britain.

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