



Stars of CCTV? How the Home Office wasted millions - a radical 'Treasury/Audit Commission' view.*

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Abstract

This paper looks back on earlier pieces on CCTV in Britain by Groombridge and Murji and argues that the identified failures of CCTV, in terms of effectiveness and value-for money, have been consistently ignored both at the time and in more recent government evaluations.

Introduction

More than twelve years ago Karim Murji and I published a series of articles that raised doubts about the success of CCTV in Britain (Groombridge and Murji 1994a & 1994b and Groombridge 1995). These made the point that many of the successes were overstated, that failures were not looked for and that instead of the installation of CCTV being part of a strategy it had become 'the' strategy. The articles originated in an attempt we had made to evaluate a system. We were unable to carry out a methodologically sound evaluation as the figures, such as they were, could not be mapped onto the areas covered by the cameras. Moreover, it was clear that the 'successes' claimed were not the successes that the scheme had originally aimed for. Furthermore, claims for its success preceded our work and had been part of the ruling group's successful election strategy. The only relief was that: neither our names nor institutions were linked to these claims.

I was the field researcher and, looking back, am going to claim that my experience as a civil servant in the British Home Office (1973-1993) informed those parts of the article which touch on value for money. We pointed out the civil liberties arguments – still relevant – and speculated on the paternalistic nature of CCTV and even on possible unintended consequences but here I want mostly to return to what I am going to call the radical 'Treasury' view or even a 'prudent' view.

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The Treasury view is to argue for ‘value for money’; to demand that programmes are efficient, effective and economical and in the UK, the Audit Commission exists to ensure it. It may be these sorts of arguments that eventually scupper plans for ID cards. Clearly though, given the growth in CCTV, the Treasury has failed to restrain the Home Office in this. My intention therefore is to argue from a radical perspective – that is broadly sceptical of CCTV – that the Home Office, and therefore the Treasury, has wasted enormous sums of tax payer’s money on the deployment of CCTV. This will be done by a close reading of research funded by the Home Office into the effectiveness of CCTV. First though some of the other arguments around CCTV – and my position on them – need to be addressed.

Civil liberties concerns about CCTV are real and are even raised by supporters of it the more to assure the public that, like ID cards, the sacrifice would be worth it and/or that the innocent have nothing to fear. I have suggested that some of those concerns for individual human rights are uniquely modernist and class, race and gender b(i)ased. Yes, civil rights are important but it would be a mistake to suggest that they had ever actually been universally achieved and that CCTV was a unique derogation from them. Clearly urban male elites always enjoyed any such rights far more than rural communities or minorities. It is this modernist bias that seeks to control CCTV simply by codes of practice or legislation. Our own nosiness, Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* or now *Red Road* and *Big Brother* and other ‘reality TV’ ought to remind us of the scopophilic drive to see and, increasingly the exhibitionist desire, to be seen.

I plead guilty to some postmodern and cultural criminological excursions into CCTV (2001 & 2002) but rather assumed that after my earliest work those in a better position to take up a realist stance would. However, they have not; so now feel I must return to the subject. Set out below is a summary of the arguments in Groombridge and Murji (1994b).

Still ‘as easy as AB and CCTV’

Early on we state, ‘CCTV now seems set to achieve the status of an article of faith in popular crime prevention discourse’; this and the dismissal of the civil liberties arguments we felt obscured, ‘the rather more prosaic question about whether CCTV really works or not, its financial costs and potential “dis-benefits”’ (1994b:283).

We quoted, in part, from Burns (in Tilley, 1993) to make a point but the full quote is given here, with the additional information that Burns was then Deputy Under Secretary at the Home Office:

The results are encouraging and *suggest* that CCTV can, in certain circumstances, make a useful contribution to crime control. But perhaps one of the most valuable lessons from the report is the illustration of the *need to consider the precise reasons why CCTV might help to prevent crime* in a particular case. As the report shows, even with a relatively simple measure such as CCTV there are *a variety of ways in which it could contribute* to crime control. Which of these ways is most relevant will

often depend on *local circumstances* and the nature of the local car crime problem. This thought provoking report valuably brings out the *need to consider these interactions carefully if value for money in crime prevention is to be achieved and if we are to learn from experience.* (my emphasis)

As this was the foreword to Tilley's work one might argue Burns read it but it is less clear that others in the Home Office or local government did given the conclusions of Gill and his co-workers whose work we consider below.

Burns drew his conclusions from Tilley's work on the use of CCTV in car parks. Our thoughts were prompted by an attempt to evaluate a CCTV scheme in a Home Office Safer City project. The Home Office were informed of our concerns. Two specific objectives were cited for our scheme: to tackle robberies from Asian women at bus stops and car crime and yet success was claimed because it had assisted traffic management; no mention was made of crime.

Prospectively we warned that:

the capture of more offenders may look good statistically, but if time is spent processing low-grade, petty and opportunistic offenders while their more professional counter-parts get way then this is hardly the positive outcome it might appear on the surface. (1994b, 287)

Further we were concerned that one outcome might be 'bystander indifference', a feeling that reassurance might go too far and that, 'instead of worrying about 'Big Brother' watching them, the public may perceive that 'Big Father' has sorted everything out' (1994b, 288) with impacts on public support when deficiencies in the system and management of it reveal this not to be the case. Finally Surette has tested this and found no evidence for it (2006).²

We concluded, 'CCTV can only ever be a tool, it is not a panacea'³ and that assessing whether a scheme was efficient, effective and economic, 'would require data on the setting of objectives, the establishment of measures of those objectives, the sustained collection of data for those measures, and evaluation and feedback' (1994b, 288). We did not spell those out but the objectives necessarily would go wider than simple reduction of crime figures.

Admittedly it is galling to find that one's early work - amongst the earliest on CCTV - not cited often but it is more worrying that some of the issues raised remain unaddressed; or, at least not addressed directly. Here we turn to the work of Gill *et al* (2005) and Gill and Spriggs (2005) who do not cite our work. Clearly the Home Office and many others have written about CCTV, and surveillance more generally, but the intention here is to respond to this latest work as an academic with an early interest in the field, as an ex-Home Office employee (administration and policy) and as a tax-payer. To undertake this requires

² It is not clear that his narrow methodology was likely to answer the wider issue that we raised.

³ It is gratifying that Phillips (1999) adumbrates this in her review of the literature then.

substantial quotation from Gill and his colleagues interspersed with exegesis before a short 'told-you-so' conclusion.

'easy to conclude from the information presented in this report that CCTV is not effective'

Gill and co were given full access and I make no complaint about the figures and many of the observations they make but their concluding remarks are a marvel of drafting, designed to do some justice to the figures without offending the Home Office or frightening the public too greatly. Yet, as we shall see, there is damning enough evidence in their work and its silences.⁴

At the time of writing the Home Office is under extreme pressure: losing the Home Secretary, losing foreign and other prisoners and failing to control the agenda on immigration as well as failing to persuade the public and press that crime is going down. Now I want to assert that for the last 12 years it has wasted money on CCTV and continues to lose more, in part to reassure the public.

Gill et al (2005) comprises fourteen case studies of a variety of CCTV systems and locations. Gill and Spriggs (2005) is an elaboration of those case studies into an assessment of CCTV. What follows mostly engages with Gill and Spriggs but some facts from Gill et al stand out. The cheapest capital scheme was 'Dual Estate Area B' £43,237 and the most expensive 'Hawkeye' at £3,381,572. Ongoing running costs are approximately 10% of the capital cost. Of the fourteen schemes they examined only one showed a decrease in crime that was statistically significant which might plausibly be related to CCTV. Only one other scheme showed a statistically significant fall and many showed rises. Their conclusion is that:

The belief that CCTV alone can counter complex social problems is unrealistic in the extreme. At best CCTV can work alongside other measures to generate some changes, but it is no easy panacea, and there is a lot still to be learnt about how to use it to best effect. (Gill et al, 2005:36)

These matters are taken up by Gill and Spriggs (2005) their extensive concluding remarks open thus:

It would be easy to conclude from the information presented in this report that CCTV is not effective: the majority of the schemes evaluated did not reduce crime and even where there was a reduction this was mostly not due to CCTV; nor did CCTV schemes make people feel safer, much less change their behaviour. That, however, would be too simplistic a conclusion ... (Gill and Spriggs 2005: 115)

⁴ Whilst the chapter on economics is very mixed it not referred to in the conclusion specifically other than point out the cost. This might make another point of engagement for critical research.

They are right, it would be too simplistic and they offer a number of reasons before moving on to put the most positive spin on their findings. The reasons they give are:

- crime rates are not a good measure of effectiveness;
- the unrealistic expectations of CCTV;
- that objectives did not drive the scheme;
- the problems and possibilities caused by other measures; and,
- the public's support for schemes.

Let's take each of those in turn.

Few criminologists would disagree that crime rates are not good measures. Yet CCTV was 'sold' and continues to be sold as the answer to crime and crime continues to be popularly identified with the crime figures. Since the Home Office and Ministers continually worry about the public's ignorance of or scepticism toward claims for reductions in crime might the money have been better spent on crime education? They are also right – though an uneducated public might not think so – to claim rising reported crime as a potential success. They are, however, clinging on desperately when they point to the effectiveness in a few high profile cases. It might equally be argued that these were actually a distraction from the main business. They also note that all fourteen schemes passed on 'some images (although only a few in some cases) to the police' (2005:115, their emphasis). Finally, in this section, they admit a downside, 'some of the police showed concern that they were being "imaged out"'. They don't put it this way, but our civil liberties, and any conspiracy to deny them, are protected by 'cock ups' which also allow criminal victimisation. They don't mention second generation or expert systems where computers do the watching (but see Surette (2005) for some of the issues).

CCTV manufacturers and fitters, local and national politicians and local media have all been drivers for the deployment of CCTV and national media have been insufficiently critical or at least sceptical. Moreover British television programmes like *Crimewatch* appear to show its success or utility and other reality formats its entertainment value. They associate the lack of realism about what CCTV can expected do to these issues: 'it was rarely obvious why CCTV was the best response to crime in particular circumstances' and more damning still, 'CCTV was installed in areas and circumstances where it was unlikely to be effective' (2005:116). In our article we noted that the local FE College wanted CCTV simply because it had a crime problem and that a neighbouring college had cameras.

The failure to set proper objectives or to allow other matters to drive the implementation is very kindly glossed thus, 'the failure to achieve crime prevention objectives was arguably less the failure of CCTV as a crime prevention measure than of the way it was managed' (2005:116). In the previous section 'failures of implementation' were also preyed in aid of CCTV.

In addition to the problem of poor management and implementation schemes were not optimised to take into account other existing or planned

measures. A bonus, like the traffic management function in our scheme, was management of public space and ‘undesirables’.

Finally, they note that though the public felt no safer and had come to perceive CCTV to be less effective than they thought, ‘there was no pressure to have it removed’ (2005: 117). Quite. CCTV clearly has some utility and an ‘I’ve-started-so-I’ll-finish’ mentality may keep it in place. At the moment only abstract civil liberties arguments have been raised against CCTV but if residents were informed of the full costs and lack of success for those benefits and potentially more beneficial uses for the money could be proposed (such as ‘more bobbies on the beat’) then opinions might change.

So criminologically they are correct to doubt crime figures; evaluation wise they are right to point out the lack of reality of objectives and failures to follow objectives and the confounding factors. They top this all with the trump card of public support. Yet at each point they have done this by a Panglossian cheerfulness in the face of their own data which might have crucified CCTV. At each point in which pessimistic or sceptical conclusions might be drawn they chose an optimistic one or, when pressed, see the problem as belonging to the past; from which we might learn lessons. Their work is a hagiography of CCTV.

Always look on the bright side of CCTV

Having entered all these reservations on the life of CCTV they find nine reasons to be cheerful or, as they put it, ‘Going forward: building on the positive’; the reasons are:

- the importance of area;
- the density of cameras;
- success against acquisitive crime;
- the scope for special initiatives;
- the relationship with the police;
- the conjunction of other crime prevention measures;
- the level of lighting;
- the level of monitoring; and,
- the issues raised by redeployable systems.

From all the data they broadly conclude that the area that CCTV is installed in is important. They rightly opine that this is more than just car parks but keep their observations topographical. However a smaller scope or a reduced set of workable objectives might be the reason for such success as is found.

Whilst the density of cameras generally increased the prospects of crime reduction it was not guaranteed. They also point out that in areas with established drugs markets that have resisted street surveillance then CCTV won’t work. They don’t point the finger but this does suggest that a scheme did just that. That is instead of thinking through why human surveillance was not working money was wasted by unthinkingly adopting the CCTV ‘solution’.

Success against acquisitive crime particularly car theft was seen in most areas though a confounding issues not mentioned might be improved car security and the decreased fashion for joyriding. Perhaps it might be put in other ways. It was less successful against impulsive non-instrumental crime. Viewers of series like *Crimewatch* are treated monthly to violence captured, occasionally prosecuted but never deterred by the cameras.

Special initiatives appeared to show some prospects if well planned between police, camera operators and other stakeholders. Again they are tentative but another take on this might relate to the need to renew or refresh initiatives. That is even if CCTV, or street lighting etc, 'works' its effectiveness decays.

As might be imagined from the foregoing relationships with the police are crucial. Such joined up local government whilst difficult to achieve should be obvious in advance and not as a result of such a study. Moreover, other crime prevention measures like Retail Radio could improve a scheme but again it needed thinking through. Furthermore the level of lighting was crucial, often too low in residential areas or too high in some cases causing flare on the monitors. The issue of low light levels will no doubt be addressed in due course by better cameras but no mention is made of the quality of life for those they want to impose floodlights on or the environmental issue of light pollution. What is clear is that if cameras are placed where they cannot have an effect – because lighting is too low or high – then it cannot work; and again money has been wasted.

A good point is made that level of monitoring is important. Where residential areas were monitored from the same control room as a town centre it received proportionately less monitoring of screens. Of greater concern was the problem where a small town shared a control room with a larger one. Clearly this problem could be overcome with more staff and more expenditure. Dealing with the torrent of information in the digital age is difficult and the old practice of 'turning a blind eye' or using 'coppers nose' is not available to the cameras.

Redeployable systems were not seen to be effective because of their short term nature but the public's demand to hold on to a system once deployed is noted:

people liked them where they were and wanted more, not fewer. Many people could see deficiencies in the system, but such doubts rarely led them to conclude that what the cameras were doing was not worthwhile. (2005:119)

They then conclude finally, 'what is clear is that all areas need to develop a strategy for using CCTV' and that, 'there was little emphasis on showing why CCTV was the best solution' and that money had gone to 'areas that had justified their claim on what appears to thin evidence' (2005: 120). To put it bluntly, 'assessed on the evidence presented in this report, CCTV cannot be deemed a success. It has cost a lot of money and it has not produced the anticipated benefits' (op cit).

What should the Treasury, the Audit Commission, the National Audit Office, the taxpayer make of all this? Tilley (1993) reported for the Home Office and went on to be a consultant to them. He was always scrupulous about the limitations of CCTV and

methodological issues. He retrospectively presented his research. Murji and I (1994) managed little research but offered prospective advice based on that and working through the issues. That advice has gone unheeded and money has been wasted.

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