

## Editorial

# A new 'baroque arsenal'? Surveillance in a global recession

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Britain's right-wing *Daily Mail* newspaper has long walked an uneasy line between populist tough-on-crime rhetoric and a more libertarian anti-big government and anti-snooping stance. Whilst it can hardly be accused of a sophisticated analysis, the paper sometimes stumbles on interesting developments, as it did in December 2008. It appeared that CCTV might be one of the first casualties of the global recession:

As cash-strapped police forces and councils around the UK are forced to tighten their belts in the recession, CCTV cameras around town centres are being left unmanned as they can't afford to pay anyone to watch out for crime as it happens. (Camber, 2008)

As Nic Groombridge pointed out in this journal in 2008, and as William Webster confirms in this issue, the huge spending on video surveillance in the United Kingdom appears to have been a massive waste of money measured under any normal criteria. What is more, this is no longer an observation confined to academic reports and analysis. The honeymoon period for CCTV in Britain is over and, as I have observed in discussions with Local Authority CCTV officers and police recently, there is a potentially massive argument going on behind the scenes about who will pay for the monitoring of cameras. At one CCTV users' event, a local government officer suggested that the police should pay local authorities for the use of their cameras, a suggestion the police which police saw as ridiculous. Other operators argued for a more typically neoliberal competitive model where 'successful' money-making CCTV operators could take the 'business' of other authorities, and use their control rooms to remotely monitor ever increasing number of cameras across a wider geographical area. And some, like the city of Worcester, the town in the *Daily Mail* report, are just mothballing their monitoring operations.

This brings up several issues. As Clive Norris, Mike McCahill and I noted in the editorial to our CCTV special issue back in 2004, the UK is supposedly a model for the rest of the world. As I mention in my review article on where Surveillance Studies is going in this issue, an incoming President Sarkozy of France demanded the same number of cameras as the UK, and the enthusiasm for video surveillance increases unabated around the world. This is particularly true in emerging economic powers like India and China, as well as in the post-9/11, post-PATRIOT Act, USA. And the recent pattern in the USA appears to have been much the same as that which occurred in the UK in the 1990s: the local media reports upbeat stories taking what the authorities report about the 'success' of the scheme with regards to both crime prevention and detection, at face value, with no alternative view or wider investigation. And whilst Britain is held up as a model to imitate in terms of the numbers of cameras and CCTV systems, none of the optimistic, technofetishistic, advocates of such policy learning appear to pay any attention to what has been learned in the UK about the failures of video surveillance in practice, just as Britain and Germany never learnt much from the even earlier experiments by police use of cine and TV cameras (see Williams' and Kammerer's fascinating pieces in this issue).

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Certainly, CCTV technology is far better now than it was in the past, with clearer images, more usable cameras, better infrastructure, digital storage and a whole range of software add-ons. So it could well be that the more advanced systems being installed in the USA and elsewhere will 'work' better than those more primitive systems installed in Britain in the 1990s did. The installation of new CCTV systems is being driven by an avaricious security and surveillance industry and the technological lock-in of large state security and transnational information-sharing projects, for example the Interpol global facial recognition database (Bowcott 2008b) and the FBI's 'Server in the Sky' database-of-databases (Bowcott 2008a). Surveillance technology has become the new version of the nuclear 'baroque arsenal' identified by Mary Kaldor in the Cold War: massive, increasingly inefficient, complex and intricately connected projects that generate new 'needs' whether they succeed or fail.

So who is going to do anything about this? The incoming US President Obama may do; we shall see. However, certainly neither the UK, with its boundless enthusiasm for data, nor the European Union. The intermediate report of the European Security Research and Innovation Forum (ESRIF 2008), and the controversial 'Future Group', whose reports have been made public by Statewatch, demonstrate a rather limited understanding of ethics and the social impacts of surveillance technology. The fashionable idea to deal with the irritating question of people objecting to ever-increasing security, apparently influenced by success of environmental labelling, is the idea of EU security 'standards' or even an EU 'security label'. The concept is pitched largely towards reassuring the public in the usual patronising way of expert-led corporate politics. Public ignorance is always felt to be the root problem and efforts to consult are tokenistic and far from providing real accountability or democratic oversight. ESRIF, for example, claims to consult with 'civil society', though their membership hardly seems to substantiate this claim.

What we need are limits. We need to decide what is beyond acceptability. And we need transparent methods for decision. Most governments don't use any robust methods by which they might be able to assess proposed surveillance technologies, either in themselves or in comparison to other technologies or indeed to non-technological options. However, in a global recession, the issue of the obvious inefficiency of video surveillance as a crime-fighting tool might be the thing that eventually causes the CCTV promoters to take another look. In times like these it will probably not be popular resistance, or high-level policy, that is the biggest enemy of surveillance, but capitalism. Certainly, we are going to see an interesting struggle developing between the behemoth security and surveillance industry and the many other industrial sectors, businesses and Local Authorities who are seeing the losses incurred through the operation of an increasingly baroque arsenal of surveillance technologies, border controls and databases.

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