The Surveillance Web

by Mike McCahill

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Policing, Surveillance and Social Control

by Tim Newburn and Stephanie Hayman

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Reviewed by Adrian Barton

I have to confess that I am an avid watcher of the Discovery Channel, especially those programmes that detail the development of the human species from the ape-like beings of our ancestors to our present, allegedly, more refined version. One of the recurring features of this type of programme is the emphasis the writers and presenters place upon the human species' ability to adapt tools, which were initially designed for one purpose, to fit wider and more diverse needs. Moreover, each adaptation seemingly carries with it both positive and negative benefits to human society. For example, it appears that fire was probably first used to keep warm, as a form of defence and as a means to make food more palatable, all of which are positives. However, it was also used as a form of attack, as a way to harden the tips of weapons and as a method of mass destruction, which have negative consequences. Over time, fire and its positive and negative outcomes have become so entrenched in human society that it is accepted without question. For the majority of time our only concern with fire is outcome based – does it work in whatever role we have employed it? Only when we are faced with outstanding examples of the potency of fire do we pause to reflect on its true potential and impact on the development of human society.

Broadly speaking, the same can be said of CCTV. It began life with one purpose, has been adapted by human society to fit wider needs and with that adaptation has come both positive and negative benefits. Equally, in a very short time it has become so pervasive that we often fail to even recognise its presence; when we do acknowledge it, it is often with a mundane interest in issues of its effectiveness. However, just like fire, from time to time we are reminded of the potency of CCTV and its potential for society: who cannot have failed to have been moved by the CCTV images of the abduction of Jamie Bulger, or the exuberant skipping of Damilola Taylor? However, just as our fascination with a large bush fire wanes once it is extinguished, as soon as the moral panic over the captured images subside, CCTV returns to its place amongst the background noise of modern urban life. Not so for the respective authors of these books. They provide a fascinating account of aspects of CCTV and surveillance that served to remind me of the wider issues surrounding what has become a commonplace in my life. I am sure that almost every UK-based reader of this article will spend most of their day moving from one panoptic gaze to another: reading these books will make the reader more alert to the fact that being watched in the act of walking for the bus is part of a wider social, political and cultural process!

The works themselves are similar in many ways, but have enough differences to make the content of each complimentary and not competitive. Essentially, they both employ case studies that explore the genesis and outcomes of the construction and installation of CCTV systems, albeit in different types of locations, to engage with some of the more complex elements of a debate, which normally focuses on technological concerns and the needs of

administrative criminology. They also examine the creation of a surveillance web in 'closed environments'. By this, I mean that both sets of work relate to spatially bounded areas. McCahill's work looks at shopping malls and, briefly, tenants in a high-rise housing block, and Newburn and Hayman look at a surveillance system in a police station's custody cells. The bounded nature of the location means that, unlike open street CCTV systems, there exists a condition where social relations between the watched and the watchers can grow, due to the fact that there is a regular set of watchers and watched who pass through the bounded area.

Mike McCahill's work examines the 'rise of visual surveillance in an English city'. It has two stated aims, which it more than fulfils. These are to 'locate and analyse the emergence of CCTV in relation to the central concerns of theorists of modernity' and to 'provide a micro-sociological account of the construction and operation of CCTV network in one city'. This work takes as its central focus the interplay between systems of surveillance and the societies on which they concentrate. In this quest, McCahill takes the reader on a journey that begins with a comprehensive review of theories of time-space distancing, the panopticon, post-Fordism and risk society, then moves, via reference to empirical work, through the machinations of individuals and organisation in justifying and creating a surveillance web, on to a fascinating ethnographic account of the operation of the system, and then concludes the work by going back to theory.

Tim Newburn and Stephanie Hayman's work looks at an experiment that took place in the custody cells at Kilburn police station. Following the death of Marlon Downes in Harlesden police cells in 1997, the Metropolitan Police decided to install CCTV into the cells of Kilburn police station and not just in the booking areas and corridors. This is a modern, technological response to the question *quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* which was famously asked by Juvenal two thousand years ago, and has bothered successive waves of philosophers since. The main thrust of this work is to 'raise issues about the impact of new technology' and, alongside this 'address a range of broader issues about human rights . . . technology . . . and challenges the ways in which the roles of police, their governance and the use of CCTV are currently conceptualised . . .' It addresses that task by providing a look at police/community relations, the treatment of suspects in custody and brief history of CCTV. It moves, by drawing on its own empirical data, to describe the events that led to the experiment and its impact. The work concludes with a discussion about the installation of CCTV in police cells and the implications this holds for contemporary surveillance and policing.

There are a number of strikingly similar findings in the works; findings that I am sure would be replicated in almost any subsequent similar case study. One of the most thought provoking is summarised neatly by the title of chapter six of Newburn and Hayman: '*We're all on camera now*'. This is mirrored in McCahill's '*Watching the Workers*' and *The Panopticon Mall*. Both relate to the human species tendency toward adaptation, noted above. In both cases, the respective chapter deals with the impact surveillance has on those who are normally the watchers. Each book allows the authors to detail the manner in which CCTV is used to watch the actions of workers as they go about their day-to-day activities. In many ways, the responses of those interviewed about being monitored by surveillance cameras are a microcosm of society's views on CCTV. For example, in the work of Newburn and Hayman, they interview a number of non-police workers who need access to prisoners. The responses seem to reflect the view that CCTV is at once a good and bad thing, depending on the manner in which it is used.

This is evident in the response of 'S2'. This person is clearly concerned about the presence of CCTV when they are conducting consultations with their clients and views the cameras as a threat their ability to conduct their work in the manner they wish. Equally, this respondent has issues about trust in the system and the police who operate it. This is especially the case around the question of whether there is an audio link into the cells, allowing the police to

eavesdrop on solicitor/client consultations. Clearly, for this person the intrusive nature of CCTV is seen in a negative manner. However, later in the chapter the same respondent notes that CCTV is a good thing in as much that it serves as both a 'source of evidence' and, when linked to 'the camera as a guarantor of protection', can ensure that allegations made by prisoners against the police can be substantiated or refuted.

The same is true in McCahill's case. In *Watching the workers* and *Panopticon Mall* he notes that the system, which was installed to combat the 'external threat' of shoplifters and burglars, has been adapted to cover the 'internal threat' posed by the workforce. McCahill notes that managers employ the system as a matter of routine to view the honesty of staff, outside contractors and cleaners. Moreover, the system seems to be increasingly used to monitor the manner in which shop staff approach their day-to-day work – whether they are friendly and attentive to customers – as well as the productivity of the shop floor staff. However, and again demonstrating the ambiguous nature of surveillance systems, in another chapter, McCahill alerts us to the fact that some of the workers can use the system that monitors them to monitor the activities of the management and use that knowledge to introduce easing practices, such as unauthorised breaks.

Both sets of authors offer interesting discussions about the impact this 'invasion of the private' has on the workers who experience it. Newburn and Hayman suggest that the watching of the watchers is a fairly unusual occurrence but this seems to be at odds with McCahill who suggests that it is a routinised process of some security guards to use surveillance and communication technologies in order to monitor the activities of the bosses. Nevertheless, both books note that the installation and use of surveillance technology does change the nature of work, providing as it does the opportunity for the 'boss' to be omnipotent.

The other great strength of both works is that they move beyond the technical/administrative concerns surrounding CCTV and surveillance that so often dominate discussions around this growing social phenomenon, whilst also alerting the reader to the fact that these systems are 'social' and both require and facilitate human interaction. As an aside, that is not to say that the respective authors dismiss the impact of technology and the concerns of administrative criminology. Newburn and Hayman have an interesting section that adds to the debate surrounding the impact of technology on 'policing'. Equally, McCahill notes that the within the obsession of 'what works' in crime prevention, the CCTV/surveillance web is seen by some as providing the 'silver bullet' in the fight against crime and disorder. Consequently, central government, the Home Office, local politicians and sections of the media are keen to promote surveillance as the way forward in producing a utopian society. McCahill suggests that in order to 'sell' CCTV to the general public great play is made of the positive advantages systems bring to individuals and communities at the expense of a fuller, more rounded public debate.

However, whilst these pertinent, but somewhat well, if not over rehearsed points are addressed in the books, they are only a minor part of the overall packages. Newburn and Hayman, and to a greater extent McCahill, are insistent on the need to see surveillance systems as social entities that are received and seen to 'work' only in as much that the systems use the existing patterns of social relations, existing cultural patterns and political practices. This, I believe, is an important insight and one that is often overlooked in favour of placing too much emphasis on the technology and underplaying the fact that the vast majority of CCTV systems are staffed by people, making the surveillance web reliant on humans to interpret the actions witnessed by the cameras and to decide what action to take in any given circumstance.

In emphasising the importance of people within the surveillance web, McCahill provides a number of fascinating accounts of life amongst the CCTV operatives and security staff working in 'Housing Estate Mall'. In it, he notes that a large number of the security staff grew

up on the estate and often went to school with some of the 'druggies', 'G heads' and 'scag heads' that become the target for much of the surveillance that takes place. He notes that the security guards use their local knowledge, allied with information gathered in their private lives, to interpret the images generated by the cameras and thus 'police' the mall. For example, the knowledge accrued by the security staff allow them to 'have a word with X', or to get information on former 'watched' drug users who are 'off the gear'. Such intelligence, often gathered through informal social networks including dart teams and Sunday league football teams, allows the security guards to work beyond the limited and potentially dated rogues galleries and banning books that are held in the control room.

In those instances, as well as others in the book that are beyond the scope of this review to highlight, McCahill is providing evidence that 'good' policing (whether that is 'private' or 'public' policing) is facilitated by intelligence often generated by solid relationships with the community the policing organisation serve, as well as making the point that images need to be interpreted with some reference to ever-changing local conditions. It may be a sad indictment of the relationships between the Metropolitan Police force and the sections of the community it serves that Newburn and Hayman cite an interview in which the Borough Commander bemoans the lack of trust the community holds in the police and the fact that the introduction of CCTV was, in part, an attempt to reassure the Black community that the Force did not deliberately mistreat 'certain types of detainees.' Arguably, and again demonstrating the manner in which humans adapt tools for different purposes, the use of CCTV in the cells will become part of a larger 'tool kit' of public reassurance.

Finally, I would like to focus on the manner in which both sets of authors use the qualitative data their respective research projects generated. Both books, especially where they relate the stories their research unearthed, are particularly good examples of employing data and comment in order to bring the research to life. Although examining different situations and varying types of respondent, both Newburn and Hayman and McCahill allow space in their work for the voices of those interviewed and observed to emerge. Equally impressive was the manner in which each book begins with an overview of theory and context and then moves neatly back to those areas in the concluding passages in a manner calculated to challenge the reader's perceptions.

I enjoyed reading both these works and in beginning my summary am keen to reiterate the point that, in their own ways, they both move forward the debate on CCTV and the growth of surveillance. I found both of them fascinating reads, aided by the fact that they are both well written and engage the reader from the start. Both books provide food for thought and although both books are case studies, allowing only limited generalisation to be made, there are enough similarities in the findings to suggest that, were larger studies conducted into the operation and impact of surveillance systems in closed environments, a pattern could emerge. I have taken two important lessons from these books. Firstly, Newburn and Hayman have caused me to re-think my dystopian leanings toward CCTV and to take more time to consider what constitutes the appropriate balance between the challenge to privacy and the degree of protection afforded by electronic surveillance. Secondly, related to the above point and demonstrating the affinity these works have, McCahill has reminded me that the relationship between surveillance and society is a two-way affair. Over-concentration on technical and administrative concerns has somewhat hidden the fact that there is space in any surveillance system for social relations, political practice and cultural traditions.

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