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There is nowhere to hide in Sydney

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Surveillance - public and private - is everywhere in security-conscious Sydney, writes Conrad Walters.

On Monday morning as you wait for your train, wave at the camera. It is there to protect you. When you enter your office, smile into the building's surveillance system. After you have sat for a lunchtime portrait in the mall, remove any lettuce from your teeth before the ATM takes its snapshot, and be mindful you don't jaywalk under the gaze of traffic cameras. Later, if a colleague offers you a ride home, straighten your collar - you don't want to look suspicious in the car park video.

Welcome to the security-conscious century in security-conscious Sydney where surveillance, private and public, is seemingly everywhere: buses, taxis, airports, main streets, shopping centres, parks, stadiums, traffic hot spots, lifts, banks, casinos, convenience stores and beyond.

Driven by fear and by hardware that is increasingly powerful and affordable - electronics shops offer surveillance cameras for as little as \$30 - the ability to record anything and everything has spread across the land, largely without question.

No one knows how many surveillance cameras operate in Australia. Even experts are reluctant to guess, although the Australian Security Industry Association has nominated that as "a very rough estimate" between 40,000 and 60,000 cameras permanently monitor Sydney alone.

If that raises an eyebrow, spare a thought for Britain, where that nation's Information Commissioner has raised fears his country is "sleepwalking into a surveillance society". Here is why: Britain reportedly has more than 4 million closed-circuit TV cameras trained on its population, and the average Londoner can expect to be photographed up to 300 times a day.

In Australia, Rick Sarre, a professor of law and criminal justice at the University of South Australia, poses a question others have previously put: how would we have reacted during the Cold War if we were told Moscow had that many cameras trained on its citizens?

"We would have tut-tutted and talked about how terrible the Soviet Union was in monitoring its citizens," Sarre says.

He and an associate professor from Griffith University, Tim Prenzler, are trying to assess the scope of Australia's amorphous security industry, but it is a fast-moving target.

Perth installed the country's first open-street closed-circuit television system in July 1991 to watch a city square. A study in 2002 reported the number of local governments with CCTV systems had grown to 33. Three years later, a follow-up study found the number had doubled to 66. And on top of those are an unknown number of private systems.

Among those who have independently investigated the use of CCTV - which includes traditional closed-circuit TV and its digital successors - all agree surveillance has a place in a modern society, and they are adamant it can assist law enforcement. They endorse surveillance in potential danger spots such as car parks, in offices to deter pilfering and at potential terrorism targets such as airports.

But those same supporters also harbour grave doubts about the effectiveness of surveillance and they maintain serious reservations about how it is used.

Law enforcement agencies regularly cite terrorism threats to justify surveillance systems and, in the ensuing debates, civil liberties are frequently shunted aside with a familiar argument: the innocent have nothing to fear. But many of the people interviewed for this story were quick to dismantle the assertion.

"That gets trotted out all the time," says Nigel Waters, policy co-ordinator for the Australian Privacy Foundation and a former deputy federal privacy commissioner.

"If you turn that back on people and say, 'OK, if you've got nothing to hide, you won't mind telling me the last time you went to the doctor and what it was about, how much you earn [and] how much you pay the Tax Office'. People soon change their mind about whether they've got things they want to keep private."

Unease about surveillance is not limited to civil libertarians. Many people think twice before scratching an itchy nose or dislodging bunched-up underwear if in view of a camera. And for many, the very presence of CCTV fuels concerns that the world is filled with things to fear.

The growth in surveillance by governments has largely come from politicians eager to look tough on crime, but it is a false hope, says Paul Wilson, a criminology professor at Bond University, who in December published one of the country's largest studies of CCTV.

"The biggest fault of CCTV is that it bedazzles politicians into thinking they can solve a crime problem with a simple piece of technology, and that is not the case," Wilson says. "All around the world, in a variety of countries, the studies seem to show it doesn't prevent crime."

Like other studies, his research also found the public was predominantly supportive of surveillance, but that, too, may be open to question. When crime drops after cameras arrive, CCTV is praised as a deterrent. And when crime increases? It still gets praised - for detecting more.

One of the most famous examples used in support of surveillance cameras is the 1993 killing of the toddler Jamie Bulger in Britain. CCTV footage captured chilling images of two 10-year-old boys, subsequently convicted, leading Jamie from a shopping centre. But a Monash University criminologist, Dr Dean Wilson, says it was good old-fashioned human intelligence that cracked the case.

"The footage itself wasn't very clear, and its role in the apprehension of those offenders is quite questionable, but it made for very good television," he says.

"A piece of footage is shown and the assumption is it's been a crucial tool - and it may be of some small assistance in some cases - but we need to be a bit cautious about those kind of massive claims for its effectiveness.

"The reality of that is the child was murdered, so I don't know that the CCTV was particularly useful," says Dean Wilson, who, along with many others interviewed, has concluded CCTV is more helpful for investigating crimes than in preventing them. Indeed, surveillance footage has a strong record of helping police secure confessions and convictions.

But Wilson, who worked on a key 2003 study of CCTV, also says surveillance technology is often used to discriminate against minorities.

"The myth of these things is that they're neutral, that it's just a camera and it's just looking out and therefore everyone is surveilled in the same way," he says. "But the reality ... is they do target particular people."

He says the lens of CCTV typically focuses on youths and minority groups. He cites a seven-nation study in Europe that found camera operators focused their attentions based on the age, race and clothes of the people they watched.

"If certain groups feel they are the subject of undue attention in public space, it erodes the democratic right of all people to use public spaces," he says.

At its core, any debate about CCTV pits privacy against security, and it is the spectre of terrorism that has swayed those debates since September 11, 2001.

But the executive director of the Australian Homeland Security Research Centre, Athol Yates, believes much of the surveillance expansions that have been justified by the attacks on the United States have been misguided.

"A lot of the CCTV system has been rolled out in anticipation that it can stop terrorism," he says. "The issue really is that it has very limited real-time use. It's only used for forensic purposes, that is getting a picture of 'who did it' and then tracking back."

Yates is organising a Safeguarding Australia Conference in Canberra next month that will discuss terrorism and the balance between privacy and security.

"The general consensus is we've over-reacted to terrorism," he says.

Still, as Bond University's Paul Wilson found, the public is accepting of CCTV. Deserved or not, it provides the security people crave, and the Federal Government has aided its expansion.

One measure of that is the grants awarded by the federal Attorney-General's office under its National Community Crime Prevention Program. Of 18 grants awarded for "security-related infrastructure" last year, 10 were for surveillance projects, and the department's website singles out CCTV among its many programs.

"We're often quite mesmerised by technology," says Dean Wilson of Monash University. "I've been

in dozens of these control rooms, and you do get a bit captivated by the capacity of the camera to read a newspaper over someone's shoulder. It's quite enchanting, but we can't let that blind us from far more productive ways of dealing with social problems."

He says that after years of law enforcement dominating arguments about the balance between security and privacy, he believes the public is reassessing it.

"I think surveillance, privacy and the social impacts of surveillance are going to remain enormous questions for us as a society," he says. "But I think we're having a more sensible and balanced discussion now than we have in the past.

"People need to step back from that thing of just saying: 'We've got a problem. Let's put up CCTV cameras.' Because all that means is you're looking at the problem."

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