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In Era of Cameras, Keep an Eye on Civil Liberties

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Step into almost any office building and the guard at the front desk can watch you on his security cam. Enter a store -- pretty much any store these days -- and you know you're being recorded, ostensibly to protect against the Winona Ryders of the world.

I don't especially like being watched, but that doesn't stop me and most rational people from going about our daily rounds.

When I flip on the radio in the car and tune in to traffic and weather together, I know that most of the information I'm hearing comes straight off the cameras that monitor almost every major road in the area. Those would be the good surveillance cams.

Now explain this: Why is it that the same people who love traffic cameras and click onto online voyeur cams when the boss isn't looking start fulminating when police mount cameras on buildings in an effort to curb crime?

The D.C. Council is scheduled to hold a hearing today on how to use the city's 16 street surveillance cameras -- tiny devices attached to roofs and lampposts so police can survey sidewalks for bad guys. The way some folks are talking, it sounds as if we're in a civil liberties crisis.

At first glance, the outrage seems misdirected. Our expectation of privacy in public spaces is already limited -- walk outside and you're fair game for news cameras, marketing intrusions, police comparing you to wanted posters.

It's in privately owned spaces -- offices, shops, places of entertainment -- that we still harbor some (totally unrealistic) expectation of privacy. Fact is, business is far beyond the police in spying on us. From gas stations to restaurants, lobbies to cubicles, cameras monitor our behavior -- with almost no check on how those images might be abused. Hardly anyone squawks about that.

Yet the moment government gets into that game, we're creeped out. I know I was when a proud D.C. public schools security official showed me the snazzy system that lets him peek into the hallways of city schools.

Cedric Laurant -- a lawyer at the Electronic Privacy Information Center, a District advocacy group seeking to restrict police use of street cams -- was so disturbed that he created observing-surveillance.org, where he's posted chilling photographs of the demure little cameras that masquerade as street lamps downtown.

Laurant worries that images captured by "Tiny Brother" cameras might be stolen by hackers, or that the state might use cameras to quash dissent -- just as Soviet bloc countries used street cameras not so long ago.

But Laurant knows that in a free society, anyone can put a camera almost anywhere. In a society that slobbers over "Girls Gone Wild" on TV, it sounds a tad precious to worry about police using street cams against bad guys.

There is a difference, however: In our society, people are free to do anything that's not illegal, but the government may do nothing but what it is specifically charged to do.

It all comes down to how street cams are used. "We oppose general surveillance, but we can see supporting good regulations that protect privacy while allowing law enforcement to fulfill its mission," Laurant says.

Reasonable enough. For 30 years, police have swooned over the notion that putting cameras on the street might deter crime. But in Britain, where more than a million cameras have been installed in public spaces, studies show that while open-air drug markets, prostitution and the like can be discouraged, they're not erased -- just relocated.

Knowing that cameras are watching everywhere puts a damper on public life: Would you join a demonstration, make out with your lover, act like a fool if you knew you were on somebody's screen?

Maybe you would. Those Hollywood producers who make voyeur TV shows believe we'll do anything in public. But there is a difference when the state is watching, because the state can hold our behavior against us.

Cameras aren't good or bad. They're put to smart or dumb uses: Casting a wide eye over our streets is a police state tactic -- ineffective in nabbing crooks but chilling to ordinary pedestrians. The council should narrow the net and use cameras to catch specific targets -- red-light runners, ATM robbers, drug dealers. Even if the whole world is watching, freedom is being alone in a crowd.

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