

DOI: 10.1145/1743546.1743582

BY JAN KIETZMANN AND IAN ANGELL

Panopticon Revisited

THE YEAR IS 1787. UTILITARIAN PHILOSOPHER Jeremy Bentham publishes his ideas for a panopticon, a quite brilliant merger of architectural design with an understanding of human behavior. This is a prison requiring minimal supervision. It is circular in cross-section. Cells are placed on the circumference, stacked floor upon floor, with the doors facing a guard tower at the centre. That tower is designed so that a lone guard can see every point of the prison from behind a mesh screen – he can see the prisoners, each uniquely identified, but they can't see him. Not knowing if they are being watched, but having to assume that they are, the prisoners adjust their behavior. At regular intervals, each prisoner is relocated according to his overall record of discipline – good behavior is rewarded, bad conduct punished. Ergo, a highly efficient and cost effective method for controlling sociopaths, and thereby regulating the prison.

Fast-forward to the first decade of the 21 century, and Closed Circuit Television (CCTV). The panopticon is no longer just a concept for prisons. Manhattan's Chinatown has seen an increase from 13 to 600 'security' cameras since 1998.⁴ Britain alone has 20% of the world's CCTV cameras, which watch traffic, shoppers, and people walking down the street, all on the lookout for sociopathic acts. British subjects going about their ordinary lives can expect to be captured on camera 300 times a day, every day. George Orwell would have been proud and horrified to see that his

vision of a society monitored by cameras and computers is quickly becoming a reality; and he wouldn't be amazed that the most recent generation of cameras can also reprimand offenders in a child's voice broadcast over loudspeakers.³

These location-specific technologies, embedded into the fabric of social life, allow uniformed officials who gaze at screens to 'monitor' and judge whether or not acts are antisocial. But of course such evidence can at best help identify suspects after the event, as was the case in London's 2005 bombing, and the abduction and murder in 1993 of two-year old Jamie Bulger in Liverpool. A recent report into the London's surveillance network claimed that only one crime is solved by each 1,000 CCTV cameras.² More importantly, the technology does not stop these acts *in flagrante delicto*. Bad-deeds still happen. To be consistent with the panopticon concept, the state therefore still needs to instill the belief in the population that the very presence of monitoring artifacts means the virtual attendance of authority: that being caught red-handed on camera undoubtedly leads to punishment and perhaps prison sentences. The ability to watch antisocial behavior, and the presence of such dedicated technologies, should therefore positively direct social behavior.

The problem is that using surveillance technology involves both equipping every dark corner with a CCTV camera, and manning a remote monitor with a 'warm body' city official who will watch the happenings from afar. CCTV is not a cost-sensitive approach, and as David Davis MP, the former U.K. Shadow Home Secretary comments, it "leads to massive expense and minimum effectiveness."¹⁰ As a result, authorities have privatized some of these duties: private parking attendants assign tickets; and citizens armed with city-licensed radar guns hunt speeders for extra income (and excitement) during retirement.⁸

Of course, the outsourcing of such government services is still a far cry from a panopticon; it is solely exercising policing but in a different form.