

Who's Watching You —and When?

Public Surveillance as a Social Issue

Smile! You never know when you may, literally, be on candid camera. Since Sept. 11, 2001, surveillance technologies have become much more prevalent—and more accepted—in everyday life. It's been estimated that 4 billion hours of footage is recorded on 30 million video-surveillance cameras every week in the United States. And when new horrors occur, such as the Virginia Tech shooting spree this spring, calls resound for even more surveillance cameras and other security measures.

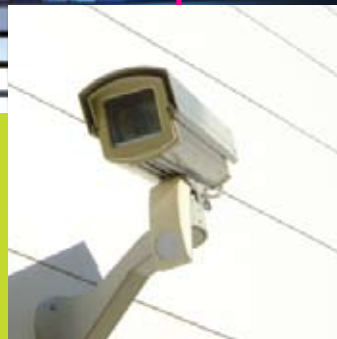
Two researchers in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences have made public surveillance a primary focus of their research. They're seeking answers to questions about how much surveillance is really necessary and how to determine when it has gone too far.

In the United States, surveillance has increased dramatically post 9/11. The chilling events of that day left most Americans with a need to feel more secure. The USA Patriot Act, adopted in October 2001, opened the door to a whole host of new ways of monitoring activities.

"I was in graduate school in New York, teaching a class, the morning of 9/11," says Torin Monahan, an assistant professor in the School of Justice and Social Inquiry. "We turned on the TV that morning and watched, and we continued to watch through the coming weeks and months as the USA Patriot Act was quickly passed. That piqued my interest in surveillance and the effect it would ultimately have on us as a society."

Proponents of greater surveillance measures argue that it keeps us all safer. Many say that had there been cameras in the dorms at Virginia Tech, the massacre of 32 students this spring could have been avoided.

But others, such as Monahan, argue that cameras only go so far and that they don't necessarily prevent crimes. They may allow authorities



to capture criminals more quickly, but they don't stop the crime itself from occurring. Further, they don't deal with the underlying social issues that cause these tragedies to happen in the first place. Worse yet, they can lull us into a false sense of security that may ultimately be counterproductive and even dangerous.

SECURITY CAMERAS, INTERNET COOKIES AND LOYALTY CARDS

Most people think of surveillance in terms of video cameras. Since 2001, the number of cameras certainly has increased. The New York Civil Liberties Union recently completed a camera-mapping project in New York City and found that between 1998 and 2005, the number of street-level, outdoor surveillance cameras had jumped from 769 to 4,468. A little closer to ASU, the East Valley Tribune looked around at the light poles and rooftops overhead in downtown Tempe this spring and counted 68 such cameras, all plainly visible from street level.

Monahan defines surveillance broadly. There's the type of surveillance that's obvious—security cameras, guard gates, tracking devices and even photo radar. And then there's the type that's not so obvious—intelligent transportation systems, Web-site cookies and even grocery store "loyalty" cards. Looking at the issue as a whole raises questions about how far a society should be allowed to go in scrutinizing its members.

"Just because we can do it, doesn't mean we should do it," says Monahan. "For me, it comes down to a question of whether we're looking at the root causes of societal problems or whether we're creating a society that's devoid of trust. At a minimum, I think this deserves to be out there in terms of public debate."

Monahan and co-researcher Jill Fisher, an

assistant professor of women and gender studies, are doing what they can to generate discussion and bring greater awareness to this issue worldwide. Their recent efforts include a series of international workshops on surveillance and inequality, for which they received funding from the National Science Foundation.

The first workshop was held at ASU this spring and attracted scholars from as far away as the United Kingdom and Finland. Workshop participants discussed the social implications of contemporary surveillance with particular emphasis on equality, civil liberties, privacy and fairness.

Monahan also has edited a book, "Surveillance and Security: Technological Politics and Power in Everyday Life." And he's been quoted on the issue of public surveillance in *The New York Times* and on National Public Radio.

RADIO FREQUENCY IDENTIFICATION TAGS

For her part, Fisher is leading an NSF-funded study on "tracking technologies" in hospitals, including the tracking of people and inventory with radio frequency identification (RFID) tags. Some of these RFID efforts we've heard of—or at least seen on television. There's the tracking of newborns to match them with their mothers, of Alzheimer's patients to prevent them from wandering away, and of surgery patients to ensure they're wheeled into the correct operating room.

These may be appropriate uses for the technology, but Fisher feels there are other—perhaps disturbing—implications. RFID systems are seen as valuable because of their ability to collect data in real time. As a result, they may lend themselves to being used for such purposes as tracking the location of employees to better manage workflow.

"There's no question that technology can increase efficiency in the health-care setting," says Fisher. "Yet when it comes to tracking people's movements, it depends on what becomes of that data. There are a lot of instances where you can't tell what is really happening, and that could have implications in terms of patient care. For instance, if nurses are being 'tracked' and they seem to be taking a long time performing a particular task, is it because they aren't efficient or because they're taking more time to talk to and soothe a patient?"

Fisher became interested in RFID and related technologies after the Food and Drug Administration announced in 2004 that it was approving microchipping of humans for such purposes as implanting numerical keys to access medical records. Although that is happening very rarely today, it made Fisher wonder about the implications. And it was apparent to her that this might be a case of using technology merely for the sake of using it, rather than to meet a real need. After all, the microchip is only as good as the data that is loaded onto it.

RFID has other potential uses as well. Schools may implement it for student badges or cafeteria purchases. Transportation systems may offer it to give drivers a break on traffic, allowing some cars onto private roads. And airports

may use it to decide who to permit into the fast security lane. While these purposes may seem fairly benign, Monahan wonders about the implications for "social sorting" that can take place when you go too far with surveillance—giving certain people more privileges if they're willing to be "tracked."

FEELING POLICED

Another of Monahan's research projects focuses on the use of modern surveillance technologies in gated communities as contrasted with low-income public housing. How does knowing that their living space is under surveillance make people feel? Surprisingly, the answer is similar for residents of both types of communities: they feel "policed." The difference, of course, is that residents of gated communities can move elsewhere, whereas those in public housing may have more-limited options.

"Being a social scientist in the field of justice studies, my main interest is in bringing about a more just, fair and equitable world," says Monahan. "So often we, as a society, implement things just because we can. What's possible becomes inevitable. When we're talking about surveillance, we're really talking about control. Sometimes that can be a good thing and sometimes not."

As with any area of controversy, there's an active opposition movement—in this case, a counter-surveillance community. Remember the 4,458 video cameras in New York City mentioned earlier? The Institute for Applied Autonomy has mapped the island of Manhattan and determined how to get around it without encountering a single camera. Of course, a jaunt to the dry cleaner that might have taken 15 minutes

could end up taking two hours, but saving time isn't the point. The point is calling attention to the issue and raising awareness, just as ASU researchers Monahan and Fisher are doing.

"The more I learned about surveillance, the more I realized this is really something we should be talking about," says Monahan. "We should be asking questions. Is it making our lives easier or not? Do we feel scrutinized or enabled? Are we more secure or less secure?"

Fisher agrees. She, along with Monahan, intends to continue seeking answers to those kinds of questions.

"When we're analyzing the social implications of surveillance technologies, it's easy to assume we're negative about all of the current and potential uses," says Fisher. "It's not so much that as the fact that we feel it's important to bring people's attention to this issue and the way it may affect their everyday lives and interactions within our society." ■



Torin Monahan



Jill Fisher

Torin Monahan and Jill Fisher suggest the following Web sites if you're interested in learning more about public surveillance:

- Public Surveillance Project at ASU: www.publicsurveillance.com
- Surveillance & Society Journal: www.surveillance-and-society.org
- Urban Eye Project (Europe): www.urbaneye.net
- Institute for Applied Autonomy (iSee): www.appliedautonomy.com/isee.html
- The Surveillance Project (Canada): www.queensu.ca/sociology/Surveillance