

You can be your own Big Brother

by Pam Adams

Paul Wilkinson, president of his neighborhood association, took the crime-fighting ideas behind Neighborhood Watch programs to high-tech levels when he installed a video surveillance camera on his home a few years ago.

Footage he captured helped Peoria police shut down a drug house or two in his neighborhood. Wilkinson's personal video surveillance, part of a larger clean-up-the-neighborhood crusade, also may have prompted other "problem" neighbors to flee his block.

But his video camera never caught anyone actually committing a crime. In fact, in a strange turnabout, it may have saved him from arrest.

CRIMES AND CAMERAS - The increase of video surveillance raises questions about civil liberties and the potential of abuse. CNS Illustration by Scott Adrian Hinton. A set of apparently less-than-savory neighbors whom Wilkinson had complained about loudly and often once called police on him, claiming he had tried to run one of them down with his car. When a police officer knocked on the door to investigate, Wilkinson panicked. Then he remembered the video camera recording.

He quickly rewound the tape for the officer.

"There's no way I tried to hit that kid," Wilkinson says. "It was a bogus attempt at retaliation which failed only because we happened to have that system."

The camera proved his point. As cities step up their use of video surveillance as a crime-fighting tool, it also raises a new point: There's no way to predict how video surveillance can - or will - be used.

"We're being monitored and followed a lot more than we'd expect," says Marc Rotenberg, director of the Electronic Privacy Information Center (www.epic.org). "People don't appreciate how sophisticated this technology is becoming. It's creating enormous privacy issues."

Wilkinson is president of the Altamont Park Neighborhood Association. Like many neighborhood activists and advocates, he welcomes as many effective tools in the crime-fighting bag as possible, including increased video surveillance.

WHO'S WATCHING WHOM?

He and Rotenberg are concerned about who has access and who monitors how surveillance is used, but for different reasons.

Surveillance cameras can only deter crime if offenders know they'll have immediate consequences, Wilkinson says.

"If you put up cameras and nothing happens, believe me, they'll figure it out," says Wilkinson, who proposes letting volunteers monitor cameras in order to save the police department time and money.

Privacy issues don't worry him.

"If you're selling drugs along Sheridan Road, is there an expectation of privacy?" he asks.

It's also fair to point out that most people have grown accustomed to video surveillance in banks, retail stores and office buildings.

What many people don't realize, according to Rotenberg, is that a hypothetical camera along Sheridan Road might also be able to see into someone's apartment. In fact, some of the surveillance cameras currently operating along Peoria's riverfront can be tilted to view inside a window - say, of a private apartment.

"We don't allow that," says Lt. Phil Benne of the Peoria Police Department.

Such cameras, known as pan-tilt-zoom cameras, can be equipped with a privacy mask - a feature that obscures the view should an operator point it somewhere it's not supposed to be pointed.

Peoria's current cameras are designated for on-street activities only; they do not have the privacy mask, according to Benne. He reiterates, however, that it's against department rules to monitor private locations with the cameras.

TECHNOLOGY OUTPACING THE LAW?

That's one of the problems, according to Rotenberg. Technology has gotten ahead of the law.

"Abuses are hard to uncover because there's not a lot of oversight or reporting."

He knows of voyeuristic instances where police officers in other areas observed young women in ways "not related to policing." He also is fielding concerns about the potential for high-tech racial profiling.

Additionally, studies on cameras' effectiveness in deterring or reducing crime have shown mixed results, Rotenberg says. Most of the studies have been done in England, which has more surveillance cameras than any other country.

While privacy guardians like Rotenberg try to get a handle on potential legal problems surrounding the rise of police surveillance cameras, neighborhood activists like Wilkinson contemplate where scarce resources are best spent: on cameras or staffing.

"There's no substitute for a good police officer," he says.

Meanwhile, the surveillance-technology industry keeps developing increasingly sophisticated techniques. The next generation of video surveillance technology may be programmed to recognize behaviors as well as to detect images and motion.

Scott Kern, co-owner of the Kern Group, an electronics security firm in Peoria, saw future possibilities firsthand when he visited Israeli homeland security firms earlier this year as part of an Illinois trade mission delegation.

Israeli security companies are working on a system they hope will distinguish movement characteristics of potential terrorists. As every person walks past these so-called intelligent cameras, say in an airport, the cameras gives each an individual threat level based on behaviors and actions. A high threat level on a particular individual triggers an alarm notifying authorities that this person may need to be watched closely.

"To tell the truth, this type of technology run amok can threaten privacy," Kern says. As someone certified to design and sell equipment for homeland security, he doesn't want it used to "observe everyday citizens going about their business."

But he knows good technology can be used for the wrong reasons.

"Here in the United States, I'm trusting the people in charge will manage and use this technology for its true purposes: crime and terrorism."

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