

CCTV

We have seen in recent years an increasing number of surveillance cameras in buildings and on the streets of Hong Kong. These cameras have an important function to play, for example, monitoring traffic flow along busy roads, ensuring that escalators and lifts are working properly, preventing theft from shops and offices, and deterring vandals from damaging property. In each of these examples we can say that cameras are necessary to ensure that each of us can go about our business safely and with greater confidence that we will not come to any harm.

Many cameras simply relay live images to a central monitor be it in the guard box at your apartment block or to a control room at Police Headquarters. These cameras are important in cases where you need to know if people are in need of help and assistance, for example, along the mid-level escalators or in a lift that has broken down. Live stream cameras can also save valuable time in cases where emergency services are urgently required, for example, to attend a fire in an office tower or a car crash on the expressway.

In more and more cases the footage that is relayed is not only viewed in real time but also recorded. An increasing number of shops and business are installing CCTV cameras and recording footage that can be referred to later particularly when a crime has been committed. These recorded images might be kept only 24 hours whilst others are stored for much longer.

There is a growing debate both in Hong Kong and around the world about the use of CCTV cameras. The critical issue in this debate is the balance between surveillance and privacy. We all want to live in a safer world but at what cost? Do we want to have our every movement watched by another person or recorded for possible future reference? Is this going too far?

There are more CCTV cameras in the United Kingdom than in any other country. It has been said that if you walk or drive across the city of London then your every movement is being captured on camera. This is a rather scary thought. If you have been to London with your parents or on a St. Paul's tour then all your sightseeing, taking a bus, train or taxi, visiting a shopping mall, watching a musical show, using an ATM, enjoying a coffee and going to a restaurant, or simply enjoying a walk in the park, had been captured on camera.

In many busy parts of London and in other major cities across the UK the cameras are not only linked to a control room but also have an audio facility. This allows the person in the control room to speak directly to the people he or she is viewing. For example, if a person is seen on camera dropping a piece of rubbish or damaging property then they can be told immediately to stop their anti-social behaviour. But do we want big-brother watching our every move? What are our rights when it comes to privacy?

There are fewer CCTV cameras in the United States than in the UK. Americans have long cherished their right to a private life without government or others knowing their business. However, since the attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001 and other threats against the country there has been an increase in the usage of CCTV across the USA. It is said that freedom comes at a price. Since 9/11 many more Americans would now argue that cameras are a small price to pay for that freedom.

So how would you react if there were more CCTV cameras in Hong Kong? Should they be fitted in taxis to safeguard drivers from violent passengers? Should they be placed in MTR carriages and on buses to protect women from indecent assault? Should cameras be installed in classrooms so that parents can monitor the behaviour of their sons? Examples of places where cameras might well be useful are endless. But at what cost? If we came to rely on cameras to safeguard property and provide personal security then our society may not in fact be any safer. We need the help and support of others in order to live our lives. Cameras and technology cannot replace respect for one another's property and well being.

J.R. Kennard