

The use of CCTV cameras - by Marylou Veith

CCTV – Closed Circuit Television – for some time at least has been used by various government agencies to closely monitor sensitive buildings and its corridors, junctions, railway stations, and prominent public places, which they fear carry the threat of a potential terrorist attack or such harmful or destructive activities.

The low cost and availability of technically advanced cameras, coupled with the policies rolled out in the wake of recent terrorist attacks in some of the major cities around the world, has indeed accelerated the use of such a way of surveillance on the unsuspecting common man. But is it really useful in all respects, or isn't there some instances at least when the common man might have felt offended by this unwarranted peeping into one's own privacy, the fundamental freedom for maintaining a private space? Well, we'll consider views from both sides before running into any sort of conclusion as to if CCTV is something useful or is it an abuse.

First the pluses; a close circuit television can effectively track the suspicious body language of unscrupulous people in the public space, especially if they are there to carry out some sort of misadventure. The big argument that is placed in support of this statement is that many terrorists, robbers and hooligans have been arrested or tracked down from the video impressions they have left behind while doing all what a normal citizen is not supposed to do.

For example, in the 9/11 incident, it was the recording of the culprits by a secret video camera in the airport that helped the police to find a lead to the Osama terrorist outfit Al-Qaeda. Again it was the CCTV footage in the London tube station that helped the police to have an idea about the apparent terrorists and their time of entrance into the station. There are also numerous other instances where a CCTV footage have helped the investigating officers to nab the offenders later.

Standing at this point and discussing the instances where CCTV footage has successfully aided the police in its mission of finding the offenders, it may appear that this mode of watching others is beneficial in all counts. But, if it were entirely right, then such incidents would not have happened in the first place itself. That is, if CCTVs were installed to monitor suspicious movements, then why the police is not able to prevent such unfortunate and catastrophic attacks from happening again and again?

The answer is pretty clear. A CCTV can capture so many dimensions at a time, but the monitoring system also needs alert humans to watch and analyze each footage on the fly. Unless this happens, it will be a revolving door sort of thing consisting of attacks, investigations and recognizing faces, but no way to save the common man on the street.

Now to the other side of the coin – CCTV abuse: Over the years since CCTV was first implemented, there were also reported many cases of CCTV abuses, instances in which CCTV were misused by authorities for malicious intents.

The notable one in this genre being the case in which a police officer was involved in blackmailing few people, supposed to be gays, by tracking down the owners of the vehicles parked in front of a gay club using the police database. Other misconducts on top of the list, which were exposed by some popular newspapers in the US and UK, include discriminatory targeting on the basis of color, institutional abuses, and instances in which officers found spying on women for entirely voyeuristic reasons.

Taking into consideration all these points, it can be concluded that while CCTV to an extent may be useful, its operation must be subjected to all necessary checks and balances. But the latter, as of now, seems unrealistic to a good extent, thanks to the quick technological advancements happening in the field of electronic gadgets that makes it impossible to mark the boundaries on what CCTV should do and what not.

Therefore, it is urgently necessary to develop a public consensus on the operational limits of CCTVs, and as long as that doesn't happen, the surveillance monster will continue to intrude into one's private space and moments, downgrading all the basic ethics, values and rights of a common man's fundamental freedom to hit newer lows. In the present setup, the CCTV system does more harm than any real benefits. It should have been far better instead.

CCTV Cameras are supplied and distributed by CCTV Speciality, a leading supplier of CCTV products.

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