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Toronto's CCTV cameras: Who is watching the watchers?

By JEFF GRAY

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U of T prof leads an 'Eyes on the Street' walking tour that takes a critical look at Toronto's multiplying surveillance lenses

When urban thinker Jane Jacobs talked about "eyes on the street," she meant live, human eyes belonging to people walking around or sitting on their front steps. Streets with lots of people milling about - such as those in New York's Greenwich Village or Toronto's Annex, where she lived - are safest, she observed. There's always somebody around.

Increasingly, however, the eyes on our streets meant to increase our safety are inhuman: A growing collection of security cameras, operated both by police and businesses.

"These cameras are now a taken-for-granted aspect of urban life," says University of Toronto professor Andrew Clement, who studies privacy and video surveillance. "But we have very little idea of what is going on behind them."

Prof. Clement, who teaches in the faculty of information, hosted a Jane's Walk - part of series of guided city walks named for Ms. Jacobs - on the issue last weekend, attended by about 30 people. On Sunday, at 11 a.m., he will run the event again as part of a conference on surveillance at U of T. It is open to the public.

The walk begins under a security camera in the shadow of a Canadian flag at Nathan Phillips Square, and goes from City Hall through the Eaton Centre and up to Yonge-Dundas Square, with Prof. Clement pointing out the electronic eyes along the way.

He says he accepts that some security cameras are necessary. For him, the question is what rules should govern their use. At the moment, Prof. Clement says, even the rules that exist are not being followed by the growing number of private-sector businesses installing security cameras in shops and malls.

The city's own security cameras and those used by police include signs that tell passersby they are being filmed and why, and provide contact information for those with more questions.

But private businesses, too, are supposed to identify their own security cameras in a similar way, according to guidelines published by the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada.

And most, if not all, Prof. Clement says, fail to do so. According to a study he conducted of a sample of 50 Toronto businesses with CCTV, including banks and major retailers, none had signs that met the guidelines, he says.

"The signs are all over the map. Sometimes they are 'Smile, you are on CCTV.' Sometimes it's a big warning sign. But we have yet to find any that actually comply with the basic requirements," Prof. Clement says.

James Robinson, executive director of the Downtown-Yonge Business Improvement Area, said many small stores may not be familiar with the guidelines. Most big and medium-sized retailers are aware of them, he said, and working on complying with them.

But he acknowledged that many CCTV camera signs are "understated," as retailers want their businesses to seem inviting: "The challenge is to create welcoming entries into retail and office properties, while not discouraging clients with security signage."

It seems that no one other than Prof. Clement and activists like him are out patrolling for cameras with improper signs. Anne-Marie Hayden, a spokeswoman for federal privacy commissioner Jennifer Stoddart, said her office has only received "two or three" complaints about CCTV from across the entire country in the last six months.

Also, under those federal rules, customers can ask a business for a copy of whatever personal information has been collected about them, including CCTV footage. Prof. Clement makes a point of doing so, but says most businesses seem unaware of their obligation to cough up the images.

Toronto Police are very clear about the value of both their own complement of security cameras - to which they have added some purchased last year for the G20 summit - and footage from private sector ones.

Police spokesman Mark Pugash said one of the first things investigators do now is look for available CCTV footage, and release images of any suspects. In several recent cases, the mere release of the images prompted suspects to turn themselves in, he said: "We had one homicide where we put out images, and within an hour, the suspect's lawyer calls up and says 'My guy is coming in.'"

But Prof. Clement argues that research shows the law-enforcement and deterrent benefits of the cameras are overstated. And he warns of the potential downsides.

Police around the world are eager for real-time access to the rising number of private-sector cameras, he said. Coupled with new facial-recognition technology, the potential for abuse rises. Stores could use security camera footage to identify customers, or customer types, for marketing purposes, he says, and such powerful people-tracking technology could be abused by police.

But the frontiers of this debate are shifting, as is the accepted definition of privacy. More and more of the population itself is armed with digital security cameras - smart phones and the like - creating images that they then distribute on the Internet, where they also now share gobs of information about their personal lives.

"It's changing very rapidly. It's a live issue," Prof. Clement says, referring to what U of T professor Steve Mann calls "sousveillance," or surveillance from below, by citizens with their own devices.

Still, before Toronto goes the way of London - regarded as the world's CCTV capital with the average Londoner appearing on camera an estimated 400 times a day - the city needs to at least debate the technology and how it should be used, Prof. Clement argues.

In the meantime, the number of cameras in the city continues to grow. Some people even demand more, as high-profile violent incidents in recent years have prompted new installations on buses and streetcars and in taxi cabs.

"It's a bit of a totem to protection, I think," Prof. Clement says. "It's a bit like wearing garlic around your neck."

(Video) Eyes on the Street: A Surveillance Jane's Walk, guided by Prof. Andrew Clement, takes place at 11 a.m. on Sunday, May 15 at Nathan Phillips Square. Free.

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