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YONGE & DUNDAS



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Andrew Clement: surveillance guru

The U of T professor and co-founder of the school's Identity, Privacy and Security Initiative takes us on a surveillance scavenger hunt Downtown. (Hint: all you nose-pickers may want to avoid the Eaton Centre.)

BY: COURTNEY SHEA

Have you always been wary of Big Brother?

I'd say I've always been interested in computers and privacy—particularly the way in which computer systems are used to track people's activities. It's happening more and more frequently and, generally, we have no idea what's being done with this information.

How many cameras do you think are recording us right now?

There are thousands of cameras downtown. Just looking around Yonge-Dundas Square, I can count at least four, and if we were to walk over into the Eaton Centre there would be dozens more.

What happens to all the information that's recorded? It's hours and hours of video.

A lot of the newer equipment has video analysis capabilities, which can be used to collect data for all sorts of purposes. For instance, a computer program can now tell you who looks at a certain ad, so companies can target their marketing to the right demographic. This may or may not be shocking, but you can certainly see how unrestricted access to all of this information might become an instrument in a more totalitarian state than ours. We saw that with the G20, or in the U.S. with the Bush administration—very quickly, rights that we took for granted were abolished.

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How unimpressed were you by the use of video surveillance during the G20?

It wasn't very effective when you look at it from the three most significant angles. There's deterrence, which obviously didn't work: Most of the black bloc vandalism took place in areas where there were lots of security cameras. There's also response times: Many of the cameras were transmitting live video feed, which means the police should have showed up where the criminal activity was occurring, but for the most part, they were nowhere to be seen. And finally there's prosecution, which was also ineffective: The bulk of the images used to identify suspects were taken by private citizens at eye level.

When is—and when isn't—it legal to record someone?

When is—and when isn't—it legal to record someone?

Any time personal information is recorded—meaning that the footage is more than blurred-out blobs—it has to be on the basis of informed consent. The minimum requirement is a sign that announces you are being taped, explains the purpose, says who's doing it and gives the relevant contact information.

Are there any locations where it's illegal to place cameras? What about washrooms or change rooms?

Certain workplaces have policies that say there cannot be cameras in washrooms, but no, there's no law that prohibits that.

What about if I'm having a private party in my home and I want to tape it? Am I legally obliged to tell my guests?

There's nothing illegal about that. It's questionable, though, and you might not have those people as friends afterwards.

How does Toronto rank, surveillance-wise, compared with other big cities?

London has long been considered the CCTV capital of the world, although some are now arguing that Chicago may have just as many cameras. Toronto ranks low compared to those cities. But if nothing happens in terms of pushback, then the trend to put cameras in more and more places will continue. At this point there is no regulation, and surveillance technology is only getting cheaper.

Will our great grandchildren even understand the concept of privacy, or will it be like talking about dinosaurs?

It depends on what we do about it now. One of the first things Britain's new Conservative-led government did last year was scrap a biometric database and ID card program that had been introduced—initially for foreign nationals—by the Labour party. In England there is a much greater awareness of the fact that they are developing a surveillant society, and there's popular resistance to it.

How can regular citizens of Toronto “resist,” if they're so inclined?

Most people don't realize that whenever you're being recorded, you are legally entitled to a copy of that footage. As part of our research, my team visited 46 private stores and businesses, then submitted requests for the footage of that visit. Only three businesses got back to us with the footage. It's massive non-compliance with basic privacy rights. If the privacy commissioner were to get more complaints, businesses might be forced to adopt more appropriate, accountable surveillance practices. After this interview, I'm going to head over to Sears to request footage of myself from earlier in the day. *[Editor's note: he did.]*



LIGHTNING ROUND

Harper or Layton?

Layton.

BlackBerry or iPhone?

I have an Android.

Betty or Veronica?

I'm not going to answer that.

Dream vacation?

I'd love to go back to Venice.

1984 or Brave New World?

Brave New World is more interesting.

Facebook or Twitter?

I don't think there's a big difference.

Last supper?

My wife's seafood risotto.

Biggest vice?

Overeating.

Desert island album?

Graceland by Paul Simon. Or something by Bob Marley.

Andrew Clement leads a Jane's Walk tour of surveillance hot spots this Sunday, May 15, starting at Nathan Phillips Square at 11 a.m.

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