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Watching me watching you: The use of CCTV to support safer work places for public transport transit officers

Christine Teague, Lelia Green & David Leith

Christine Teague is the Australian Postgraduate Award (Industry) stipend holder on an ARC Linkage Grant between Edith Cowan University and the Public Transport Authority (WA). As part of her research into the culture and safety values of WA's Transit Officers, Christine embarked on a total immersion ethnographic investigation and underwent a twelve week training programme with a new intake of recruits before being allocated her own series of night-time shifts. Although Christine has a past life with the same organisation as Manager Occupational Safety, Health and Environment, this has proved to be a mixed blessing.

Lelia Green is an experienced ethnographer who herself spent eighteen months working as a bus conductor, back in the days when buses had conductors. She is the Chief Investigator on the grant for which this research is being undertaken

Dr David Leith won ECU's Communications and Creative Industries Faculty Research Medal in 2004 for his ethnographic investigation of workers' safety culture in a minerals refinery. He is an Industry Partner on the Linkage Grant into which this research feeds.

Abstract

Over recent years there has been a proliferation of Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) cameras in public and private settings in a bid to increase security and combat crime. Whilst concern abounds from citizens that the use of these cameras are an invasion of personal privacy, governments and organisations have continued to view them as a panacea in the fight against crime and public disorder. Drawing on a research project currently being undertaken in a metropolitan railway environment, this paper aims to address a gap in the CCTV literature and examines the use of CCTV cameras as a 'safety protection' for railway transit officers. These transit officers, who have similar powers to police on railway property, provide the frontline of deterrence against anti-social behaviour and violence on the rail system. Like police, these transit officers are also subject to similar investigative procedures following any complaint received from a member of the public regarding their handling of an incident. However, radioing the monitoring room and calling for a camera to be focused on them as they deal with members of the public has a number of advantages. The camera footage provides a 'security blanket' for the transit officers should any complaint be received by the organisation that they handled a situation inappropriately; secondly, it provides evidence against an offender for any subsequent court action arising out of an incident; and thirdly it provides the ability for the situation to be monitored and additional support deployed to the area should the situation warrant it. Based on the researchers observations both working with railway transit officers and in the central monitoring room of the railway organisation, this paper explores the present use of the CCTV cameras in this environment, and explores how this technology could evolve in the future.

Introduction

Over recent years there has been a proliferation of Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) cameras in public and private settings in a bid to increase security and combat crime. In some circumstances CCTV cameras act as a deterrent by increasing the fear of detection and prosecution of petty crime offenders, including those engaged in graffiti and vandalism (Coleman & Sim, 2000; Williams & Johnstone, 2000). Whilst there may be concerns in the community that the use of these cameras is an invasion of personal privacy, governments and corporations have continued to view them as an important weapon in the fight against crime and public disorder. The CCTV systems can help authorities to solve crimes and catch offenders, who often plead guilty when presented with the visual evidence (Williams & Johnstone, 2000). Some governments provide substantial funding for these cameras, and offer them as evidence to argue that they are taking steps to tackle crime (Goold, 2002; 2004; Newburn, 2001; Short & Ditton, 1998; Wilson & Sutton, 2004). This is the case in Western Australia.

This research paper examines the use of CCTV cameras in a metropolitan railway environment as part of a project that, among other objectives, aims to reduce the risk of injury to transit officers. Transit officers work predominantly at night on stations, trains and platforms, providing customer service and aiming to ensure the safety of passengers on the rail system (Teague & Leith, 2008b). Railway environments in Australia, like railway environments the world over, are subject to anti-social behaviour from a small proportion of the travelling public (Cooper, Love, & Donovan, 2007; Dickinson & Bevan, 2005; Teague & Leith, 2008a; 2008b). This anti-social behaviour can range from simple fare evasion, verbal abuse and graffiti to severe violence. Transit officers provide the front line of deterrence in the fight against these anti-social activities, as they strive to provide a safe environment for the travelling public (Teague & Leith, 2008b). As part of the project, the ethnographic researcher was required to spend time observing the operation of the organisation's CCTV monitoring room prior to working on track with the transit officers.

Research Methodology

The authors are members of a research team which includes an ethnographer, Ms Christine Teague, who is an Australian Postgraduate Award (Industry) stipend holder and PhD candidate. The project is funded via an ARC-Linkage grant in combination with support from the industry partner, the Public Transport Authority (PTA) of Western Australia. The aims of the research are to investigate the work culture of public transport transit officers to understand better the dynamics of passenger interaction with a view to improving safety. The significance lies in the unacceptable number of injuries sustained as a result of attacks upon transit officers. The health and safety of transport officers and the travelling public has implications for public transport costs, its attractiveness as a transit option and the security enjoyed by passengers. Improving the experience of public transport has flow-on environmental and economic benefits through greater use of public transport services. The project outcomes will feed into improved training for transit officers and positive culture and communication changes, with the hope of reducing injury rates.

The ethnographic research method followed in this study (Green, 2003) comprised immersion into the world of the transit officer through participation in the twelve-week transit officer training course and full qualification for the various elements of the

transit officer role, including duties on the track. Since the ethnographer is not a PTA employee, the research method did not include work as a transit officer, but it did include work alongside transit officers as an observer. In this capacity, the ethnographer was rostered into the work rota and undertook shifts alongside the transit officers, watching them work and noting the circumstances and events occurring. In addition to the participant observation phase, the ethnographer interviewed 41 people—mainly drawn from the transit officer workforce but also including relevant managers and safety officers. The interviews were semi-structured and in-depth (Green, 1999); they were recorded and transcribed and then analysed to identify key themes which helped inform the various findings and outcomes.

The uncovering of themes arising from the research allows the identification and interrogation of the meanings and organising principles adopted by interviewees. This approach has some parallels with “grounded theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990); however the aim of the analysis in this situation is not to create theory, but to explore people’s understandings and constructions of aspects of their daily lives. Indeed, whereas grounded theory constructs theory from research, this kind of ethnographic research begins with a theory which is investigated via the ethnographic research. In this case it was believed that transit officers themselves had access to a variety of understandings about safe working practices which might be uncovered through an ethnography but which were not channelled through the formal communication channels of accident and incident reports, safety committees, etc. At the same time, secondary research included reference to these written documents, a full literature review and consideration of policy proposals.

The ethnographer is a mature woman of slight build. As part of her transition from participation in the transit officer training course, to her four months’ work on the track alongside the transit officers, the PTA managers required that the ethnographic researcher spent time as an observer in the CCTV control room. This meant that the ethnographer would be fully informed as to the nature of transit officer work, and the daily challenges this group of workers faced, prior to beginning her work on the tracks. This paper is based upon the four weeks that the ethnographer spent as an observer in the CCTV control room

Literature Review

CCTV Cameras

CCTV can be defined as a system where “a number of video cameras are linked together in a closed circuit or loop, with the images produced being sent to a central television monitor or recorder” (Goold, 2004, p. 12). These cameras can be found and used in diverse situations—in shops, watching for shop-lifters; in hospitals, monitoring patients; on streets, monitoring public disorder; and the main use of these cameras is for security purposes (Goold, 2004). In the WA PTA, video pictures generated by cameras are sent, by either an underground cable or microwave signal, to banks of monitors and recorders housed in the monitoring room.

Bannister and Fyfe (2001) advance the theory that the impetus behind the introduction of CCTV systems into British towns and cities is an attempt to halt the economic decline of these precincts resulting from the rise of the safer out-of-town retail areas. Australia has followed Britain in this regard and introduced CCTV in an endeavour to rejuvenate town centres and curb the anti-social and offensive behaviour that occurs in these

precincts (Wilson & Sutton, 2004). As Williams and Johnstone state (2000, p. 184), “It is now the rule rather than the exception for any reasonably sized community to have CCTV surveillance of its public spaces”. They argue that CCTV coverage will eventually be so wide that we will take it for granted. On the other hand, the concern about privacy felt by some citizens continues to be fuelled by provocative headings such as “You’ll never walk alone” (Coleman & Sim, 2000) or “Learning to live with Big Brother; Civil liberties: surveillance and privacy” (The Economist, 2007, p.72). As a result, public opinion has tended to be polarised on whether CCTV cameras are an invasion of privacy or a necessary tool for public order. This paper adopts the position that the safety benefits of CCTV outweigh the privacy issues as far as consideration of the transit officer workforce is concerned. It is accepted that privacy is a real issue but such a discussion would require a separate paper.

Goold (2004) in his research on the way the technology of CCTV has been integrated into policing organisations and practices in southern England, found in all areas there was a positive impact on the police’s perceptions of their safety. In police-led CCTV monitoring operations, police officers were able to provide a quicker, safer and more efficient response to incidents as a result of being able to assess the situation unfolding on the monitor in the control room (Goold, 2004). This information provided details of the incident, “the nature of the disturbance and—where there is a possibility of violence—prior knowledge of which individuals are particularly dangerous” (Goold, 2004, p. 172).

The night time economy

Transit officer shifts are structured to offer the most coverage in the after-work hours. This is the time when the greatest number of transit officers are working on the PTA rail system. Hobbs et al (2003) refer to after-hours consumption of goods and services in public and commercial spaces as “the night time economy”. This includes involvement in restaurants, clubs, bars, concert venues, night clubs, gambling establishments and after-hours travel, as well as the relevant activities of workers and patrons. The CCTV system enables known potential problem areas such as stations near pubs and night clubs to be kept under close surveillance at appropriate times, particularly at closing time or prior to the departure of the last train. Chaney (1998, p. 541) believes that during this night time period “the pursuit of happiness becomes the only bench mark of value”. Alcohol—which is very much part of the Australian culture (Homel, Tomsen, & Thommeny, 1992)—becomes the drink of choice, which Hobbs et al (2003, p. 36-37) state

aids consumers in abandoning their regulated and constrained daylight personas and immersing themselves in the comparatively ambiguous and chaotic culture of the night. Alcohol consumption provides both a culturally and legally sanctioned way of altering behaviour, and it is this opportunity to enjoy legitimized “time out” in the form of hedonistic forms of experiential consumption and identification, that renders the night-time economy so alluring to young people

Licensed establishments often promote high levels of alcohol consumption with special offers such as “happy hour”, when drinks are regularly half price or available under “two for one” offers (Hobbs et al, 2003; Homel et al, 1992). Many people aiming to consume more than small amounts of alcohol travel by train, and this can lead to transit officers having to deal with anti-social behaviour resulting from their excessive consumption of alcohol or, in some cases, drugs. Volunteers from Drug ARM, which is a

professional Christian organisation dealing with people suffering from substance use, sometimes ride the train on a Friday or Saturday night on one of the lines, offering help to those under the influence of alcohol or drugs (Cooper et al, 2007).

Other research has found that the transit officer's difficult job is further compounded by youth who "hang out" around railway premises for casual social interaction, which, as Cooper et. al. (2007, p. 17) state, "may be perceived as threatening to others". This has an impact on other passengers. Homel et al (1992, p. 679) comment that the "fear of random, unprovoked violence from strangers now has a major effect on the lives of many ordinary Australians". Such fears are exacerbated by groups of young adults loitering in public places and people will stay away from areas where they perceive they may be subjected to intimidation or violence (Bromley & Nelson, 2002). One reason behind the use of CCTV is to allow the operator monitoring the cameras to pinpoint any particular anti-social group and bring it to the attention of the transit officer Shift Commander, who can alert his officers to any potential problem situations occurring and deploy them to that area.

CCTV and the monitoring of behaviour

As Goold (2002, p. 24) states, "we draw a distinction between being watched by a visible police officer and a CCTV camera mounted on the side of a building". People do not know if somebody is watching them, or who that person may be. Knowing that information, that they are being watched, they may choose to change their behaviour (Goold, 2008). This is also a possibility for people who might be anti-social. Tilley (1997) argues that having cameras present in an area provides the public with more confidence in their safety. However, researchers who investigate surveillance operations argue that a disadvantage of such surveillance is that it can lead to abuse such as racial profiling, the harassment of gays or sexual voyeurism (Goold, 2004; Smithsimon, 2003; Wells, Allard, & Wilson, 2006).

Whilst the deterrent effect of CCTV cameras on crime is still being debated (Short & Ditton, 1998; Sivarajasingam, Shepherd, & Matthews, 2003), the CCTV system has the advantages of being able to: assist public officers to carry out their duties by providing images which help the accurate identification of offenders; track offender behaviour across a variety of venues while the perpetrators remain on the organisation's rail system; aid analysis of incidents for training purposes; and assess the requirement for back up support to be deployed quickly to a situation when required. This process of monitoring and recording leaves public officers more able to deal with any problems that occur, since the situation is under continuous review rather than the shift commander and managers being regularly updated via verbal reports as to the status of specific challenges and circumstances.

Although CCTV is generally presented as a tool for monitoring the activities of members of the public, Goold (2003, 2004), in his research with police officers, found that some "had heard stories of officers being prosecuted for unlawful arrest or assault on the basis of CCTV evidence—stories that had left them anxious about being watched and the possibility of their own activities being scrutinized" (Goold, 2004, p. 180). As one officer interviewed by Goold confessed:

It affects our thinking of things a lot because obviously the cameras are there to identify possible crime about to happen, or even people who are actually committing crimes at the time. But having said that, it also records police actions. Therefore when you arrive at an

incident, you've got to be aware of the fact that the cameras are watching you. We are being recorded, the same as anybody else. Therefore what we do has to be right, it has to look right. Therefore it makes it quite a priority for most officers entering the town centre—they're thinking, "I'm on camera". (Goold, 2003, p. 194)

In only a small number of the interviews that Goold (2004) conducted were officers advised by their shift sergeants or local inspectors to use CCTV for their own advantage—e.g. providing evidence and for their own protection against complaints of an unlawful or excessively forceful arrest. Mainly officers were just warned to remember that they were being watched by CCTV cameras when they were in the town centre (Goold, 2004).

Observing the operations of the CCTV system

The railway CCTV control room observed in this research is the central security hub of the WA metropolitan rail passenger system. The entrance to the control room is not evident or accessible to the general public and control room operators enter and leave the building through swipe-card access. The strict security which surrounds entry to the monitoring room is essential to maintain standards and protect the integrity of the system. In this metropolitan rail organisation, the CCTV system includes an incident management and recording system with cameras that are capable of producing digital video and still-image pictures in a format and quality suitable for presenting as evidence in court. To maintain the integrity of this evidence, the system also includes an image storage system. As in other control monitoring rooms, the CCTV operators sit surrounded by banks of video monitors displaying images transmitted from cameras situated in the areas under surveillance. In this particular railway environment, the image locations include stations, platforms, car parks and other railway infrastructure and assets. The operation of the security system is under the control of the Shift Commander who sits at the back of the room directing operations.

Cameras situated on station premises which have an office can be operated locally; however, the CCTV operators have the ability to operate all cameras remotely. This level of remote control enables the operator to change from one camera to another on a station, change stations, change the angle on the camera or zoom in or out of a situation, or pan left or right as required. Importantly, the operator also has the ability to communicate by loudspeaker with people on a station if the situation warrants it, and passengers can communicate with the operator by pressing an emergency button located on the platform. If the passenger requires assistance the operator can view the situation and determine the appropriate response to be taken. Using the cameras the operator has the capability to monitor a person or group who may have attracted their attention, keeping them under surveillance until they have left an area. Regardless of whether an individual camera is manually switched to a particular station, all cameras continually record all activities around the clock and the recordings can be replayed later if required. This facility is often called on to assist police with their inquiries when a person of interest may have used the rail system.

Before CCTV, officers were only connected to the operations room via radio. The interface link in the radio environment, and now with CCTV, is the Shift Commander. Responsible for the operational management of incidents on the railway reserve, and the monitoring of events in the control room, the Shift Commander uses the CCTV control to provide an overview of the whole railway system. This overview permits an overall assessment of priorities and the capacity to direct operations. Additionally, the

Shift Commander on duty is the only person in the CCTV monitoring room who has received specific training and is authorised to interrogate the police mainframe computer database to check possible miscreants' identities for information that may be listed against their names, such as an outstanding bench warrant for their arrest. There is also direct access to police communications to call for additional support.

Whilst the surveillance system provides a certain sense of safety and protection for passengers, it also provides a defence for transit officers. In any dealings with passengers on the stations, the transit officers immediately radio the central control monitoring room and request cameras to be focused on the people of interest and themselves, particularly as they approach the possible offenders and deal with the situation that confronts them. In research interviews, the transit officers reported that some "trouble makers" are quick to complain that they (transit officers) act inappropriately in one form or another, such as assaulting them. In the same way that any complaint made against a police officer from a member of the public is investigated, so any complaint made against a transit officer is also thoroughly investigated. This investigation occurs regardless of whether the complaint appears to have some substance or whether the complaint appears to be ill founded. The video record of the encounter provides evidence of what occurred, which can provide protection for the transit officers in defence of any vexatious complaints against them.

Transit officers are encouraged to view the cameras as a tool: to provide evidence in a court case; to summon backup support if warranted; and as a record that is available for analysis of a specific situation, which can provide an excellent learning tool for other transit officers. The Supervisor is able to view the footage, investigate the incident and recommend any training modification or corrective actions to be taken to prevent recurrence. The capacity for the Supervisor to review an incident can allow him or her to provide advice, feedback and support to the transit officer as to whether their actions were appropriate in the circumstances.

Research observations using the CCTV system

Around midnight on one particularly cold Saturday night, when the ethnographer was observing the activities in the control room, a request came through from a city police station to actively monitor events on a particular station. The police had received a call from three young women requesting assistance as they were anxious because they were being harassed by a group of males. The operator immediately switched the video feed to that particular location and could clearly see three young women, scantily clad for the cold winter night, sitting on one of the platform seats laughing and talking, showing no signs of distress and no sign of any males in the vicinity. The operator then observed one of the of the young women use her mobile phone to make, what we later learnt, was a phone call to a different police station asking for assistance. The Shift Commander announced to the girls that they were under surveillance, and that they would be kept under surveillance until the train arrived. Police often receive mischievous requests for assistance, particularly from young women who are looking for a lift home. In this instance, the operator was able to use the CCTV cameras to monitor the situation, saving the police attending a fraudulent call for assistance.

The ethnographer also saw the CCTV system used in tragic circumstances. A suicide occurred on the tracks just outside one of the stations. When a person is run over by a train, passengers are taken off the train and the train remains stationary until the

coroner has attended. Buses are organised for passengers until rail services can be resumed on that line. However, there is a delay until the buses arrive. On this occasion, the passengers on the platform were aware that an emergency had occurred; nevertheless, in spite of announcements being made, they kept pressing the emergency button complaining that their train was late. Cameras were focused on the platforms to ensure that no one was in difficulties requiring assistance. Additionally, the operator carefully explained to the passengers that buses were on the way and the button was for emergency use only. Despite this, a number of passengers continually pressed the emergency button until the Shift Commander eventually warned them that they would be fined if the behaviour continued.

Still photos from surveillance camera can be useful as evidence in court cases. This policy of providing relevant images may backfire, however. The West Australian daily paper for example, on 11 January 2008, carried a photo of a youth spray-painting a train and captioned it to say that: "The teen doing this was convicted of graffiti-related offences. He received just forty eight hours community service. Is it any wonder they keep doing it?" (Jones, 2008a, p. 1). Further into the paper was another picture showing a youth admiring his graffiti on a computer. That article was headed, "Young vandal revels in the adrenaline rush of his graffiti spree" (Jones, 2008b, p. 7). The concern is that such coverage might reward bad behaviour rather than discouraging it, and that the use of such images might not be effective in reducing petty crime on the railway system. In this case, although the papers' readers might think it was an image produced by the PTA CCTV cameras, the likelihood is that the photo was sourced elsewhere.

Groups of young people are often the focus of CCTV attention. This may not be because they are making trouble, but because of their youth and vulnerability. Transit officers are sometimes required to deal with the results of the social dislocation of society, such as when it is not safe for youngsters to return home due to family violence (Cooper et al, 2007). Perth's trains are warm in winter, cool in summer and they provide an inexpensive venue in which isolated children can catch up with their mates who are "hanging-around". Although these particular groups of youths are aware that there are CCTV cameras in operation, they are not apparently perturbed by this. They can buy a concession day ticket which enables them to travel on the rail system until the last train home. Thus the young people are not generally doing anything illegal, although the risk is that their behaviour may be viewed as anti-social. Transit officers work to resolve conflict within such groups and between these groups and other passengers—hoping to ensure acceptable standards of public behaviour. The transit officers are very similar to the police in this respect, as Reuss-Ianni (1983, p. 19) states

A pervasive myth, encouraged by the mass media (and the police themselves), is that the police spend the majority of their time investigating crimes. In fact, the police spend most of their time resolving conflicts, maintaining and restoring order, and providing social services.

Transit officers have become used to having their actions visible and on the record. They have their own ways of responding to the presence of the cameras when dealing with difficult situations. These strategies can involve a high priority placed upon non-verbal as well as verbal communication. Actual contact with a member of the public is avoided wherever possible unless it is required for self-defence. Apart from the use of the two-way radios which link directly to the Shift Manager, there is no sound recorded on the CCTV tapes, so directions are shown, rather than simply spoken. Hugh, one of the experienced transit officers, explained during an interview that he has a range of strategies when directing a person to leave a station:

I make sure my hands are always open like this (*showing out-stretched palms*) and always making sure I'm giving directions. It's all on camera. Directions always have the direction, direction, direction. Don't push; don't push, because if you push, that's technically assault. Because you physically haven't placed them under arrest, they're actually leaving the station. If you give them a little bit of a shove, you're in trouble. They can have you up for assault.

Conclusion

Using the CCTV cameras can facilitate more effective deployment of the police, transit officers and/or emergency services to areas where a problem is occurring. This is demonstrated by the use that police made of the monitoring of the three young women alone on a railway station who were making fraudulent calls for help in the hope of getting a lift home on a cold evening. It also provided evidence after a suicide that the only emergency on the line was that involving the death itself and that the continuing pressing of emergency buttons was evidence of impatience rather than of danger. Efficient use of emergency and support resources has important safety implications since it means that routine events can be dealt with according to accepted protocols and emergency responses are reserved for true emergencies.

Although photographs from CCTV cameras are useful for court cases they may also have an unfortunate secondary value in providing notoriety for some offenders who may enjoy publicity. CCTV images are only rarely released to the press and then usually for the purposes of identifying a missing person who may have used the rail network. CCTV images run the risk of sending mixed messages to the travelling public, possibly conveying the impression that unusual events are more common than they are and also adding a vivid image to what might otherwise be a verbal report of challenging issues and events occurring on public transport.

As well as providing records of serious and threatening incidents on the train network, the CCTV system also documents the use of public transport services by those who require support and assistance. This includes some young people whom the general travelling public might regard as part of "the problem". In recent years, the PTA has allocated transit officers to work their shifts according to rosters and operational procedures, which mean that they get the opportunity over time to become familiar with regular passengers. These include young people who may regularly use the railway system as a place of safety.

Transit officers have developed a range of actions that demonstrate their intent in dealing with difficult members of the public and which communicate non-verbally the instructions which they are also speaking. These strategies are used to protect themselves against the possibility that a disgruntled person might later accuse the officer of inappropriate behaviour such as shoving, assault or being threatening. As well as protecting the public from disruptive and criminal behaviour, the cameras can protect the transit officers from false accusations. At the same time, the cameras act as a deterrent which prevent officers behaving in a manner at odds with their training and their rules.

Although there are serious issues of privacy raised by CCTV camera, which have not been addressed here, there is also significant evidence of their usefulness.

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