Visions of Control: A Case Study on School CCTV

Abstract: CCTV represents the most common surveillance technology currently utilised in schools. Introduced for crime control purposes, it has undergone immense function creep and is now focused on a multitude of behaviours and activities such as truancy, smoking, bullying, teacher performance and minor classroom naughtiness. Pupils feel that their privacy is being invaded and that they are being criminalised.

Keywords: CCTV, privacy, trust, awareness, resistance

If I wanted to be on Big Brother I would have auditioned for it

(Alyssa, City Comprehensive)

This chapter presents findings from empirical research conducted at three secondary schools located in the North of England in 2005. The study aimed to provide an in-depth micro-sociological account of how CCTV shapes everyday interactions and alters the environment of the school, moving the understanding of CCTV beyond its narrow conception as a crime control technology. The schools have been given pseudonyms to preserve anonymity: Single Sex Comprehensive (SSC), City Comprehensive (CC) and Urban High (UH), and all participants’ names have been changed.

Single Sex Comprehensive

Single Sex Comprehensive is located three miles from a busy city centre. At the time of research it had approximately 1300 male pupils, the majority of which were drawn from areas suffering from high levels of poverty, deprivation and crime. Typically, over 90 percent of students are from ethnic minorities and more than half speak English as an additional language. A 12-foot-high perimeter fence flanked the campus, although in places this had been torn down. Visitor access was controlled via an electronic gate supported by CCTV and intercom. Manoeuvrability around the school was limited by an electronic fob system that operated the internal doors to a number of corridors.

The CCTV system comprised 33 cameras located in classrooms, the dining hall, corridors, locker areas and changing rooms, although notably there were no cameras in the pupils’ toilets at the time of research. All external cameras were capable of 360-degree vision and featured pan, tilt and zoom (PTZ). Cameras recorded 24-hours a day and the system was supported by mobile phones and handheld radio transceivers operated by the site managers. The monitoring hub was located in the school reception area and featured a nine-split screen and one single screen for targeted observations. No one individual held responsibility for the operation of the CCTV, but it could be accessed from any computer in the networked system by any member of staff.