Interview with Nino Leitner - Director of Every Step You Take (CCTV in Britain)

Information Politics has conducted an interview with the director of the documentary film Every Step You Take, which examines the use of CCTV in the UK. The film comes at a time of increasing debate in the UK about security, surveillance and privacy. Whatever side of the debate you are on the film is likely to be of interest

Every Step You Take is complete and is currently looking for distribution in the UK. Let's hope that one of the PSB broadcasters see merit in screening the film as part of their public service remit. There is a great trailer here. And an official site here.

People interviewed for the film include -

Professor Clive Norris (University of Sheffield, Department of Sociological Studies, Deputy Director of the Centre for Criminological Research)

Barry Hugill (spokesman for Liberty, Britain's largest civil rights organisation)

Andy Trotter (Deputy Chief Constable, British Transport Police)

Professor Lars Mosesson (Solent University, Southampton, Law Institute)

Mark Smith (Public CCTV Manager, Southampton City Council)

Dr. Hans Zeger (Austria's leading data protection officer)

Robert Rotfier (Austrian journalist and musician, living in the UK since 1997)

Paul Smith (Chairman of the the SafeSpeed Campaign)

James Morris (CEO of Shoreditch Digital Bridge, offers residents of the London Borough of Hackney access to public CCTV cameras in the area via their TVs)

Robert Gifford (Executive Director of the UK's Parliamentary
Advisory Council on Transport Safety, PACTS)

Interview with Nino Leitner - Director of Every Step You Take

1. Tell us a little about the film, why you made it and what it aims to achieve

The project was initially started when I came to Britain as an exchange student over two years ago. I had been to the UK before, but there was one fact that amazed me and my colleagues much more than before: The omnipresence of video surveillance cameras on virtually every street of the country. And imminent and simple question emerged: Why? Why only here? Why in a country that praises itself as one of the world's most advanced democracies?

That was the time when we, a team entirely made up of foreigners from Austria and Spain, decided to cover the topic as comprehensively as possible in a documentary. It wasn't possible to

do the theme justice in the short amount of time that we had available (only some months), so I picked it up again over one year later as my diploma film and went back to Britain for a series of new interviews and research. I also wrote my master thesis about the topic - this way I was able to invest a lot of resources into in-depth research. (The thesis is written in German, but you can download it from the official documentary website if you are interested.)

The aim of the film is not to tell the audience how bad and stupid the idea of CCTV is - this is not the intention, not at all. There are some good sides to public video surveillance. However, having said that, after having done all this research and all those interviews, I felt that the negative and dangerous aspects of the technology prevail. The way in which CCTV is blindly accepted as a 'good thing' by most British people - without even knowing that several scientific studies have proven the ineffectiveness of CCTV in crime prevention - made me worry. And it also awoke the desire in me to show the public a more balanced account of what CCTV really is like and what people have to be aware of. In Britain, it is seen by many as a nostrum to all sorts of problems. But in fact, in most cases, it is just a placebo that is only too easily swallowed.

2. From the interviews conducted for the film what was the over-riding rationale amongst interviewees who argue in favour of implementing CCTV in the UK?

The over-riding rationale amongst interviewees arguing in favour of implementing CCTV in the UK might have been the simple sentence, "CCTV is effective against criminals and terrorists," regardless of what scientific studies (some of which ironically conducted for the Home Office itself) have repeatedly proven. Another usual saying seems to be, "If you've done nothing wrong, there's nothing you have to worry about." This one has been coined by John Major decades ago and has been repeated continuously ever since by the same set of people. They dismiss most privacy concerns one might have - although countless transgressions have come up over the last 20 years: Public and private CCTV footage has frequently popped up on the internet or on so-called "shagadellic tapes", showing people having sex in their cars etc.

Even famous people and their most intimate lives have repeatedly been spied on, such as Princess Diana in a department store, or German chancellor Angela Merkel in her private Berlin flat by cameras from across the street.

However, this is only one of many alarming aspects that people arguing in favour of CCTV tend to ignore. One has to keep in mind that when CCTV spread across the UK in the early 90s, there were hardly any scientific studies that supported the crime prevention pledge with which it was sold to the public. However, there also wasn't much that proved its ineffectiveness. So after billions of pounds of public money were spent on the technology, more and more evaluations showed that proved the crime prevention claim wrong. And now that all these cameras are there, it's very unlikely they will put them down again.

So of course the police for instance can't say they are useless for crime prevention. I have made the experience that facing them with hard scientific facts, CCTV proponents usually settle for the technology's post-event investigation possibilities or its effect on the people's 'fear of crime' (instead of its real impact on crime).

3. CCTV has a significant number of critics - tell us a little about the issues associated with the technology, the key concerns that people have, and the political agenda that you believe is associated with its implementation

The critics are not as widespread as one might think, at least not in the UK. First of all, it has to be said that the general public thinks that CCTV is a great thing. They usually really don't know much about it, but they think it is effective in whatever it can be used for. However ironically, we asked people on the streets if they knew what those black domes on street poles were, and hardly anyone was aware of the fact that they are cameras - most people thought they were streetlights. If people don't have to do personally with something, they just have to take for granted what others say about it. So they listen to the media. And who do they hear talking about CCTV in the media? Almost exclusively those who have vested interests in the proliferation of CCTV, like local police chiefs, camera manufacturers etc.

And I think there are mainly two reasons why the media have largely been sympathetic to the idea of CCTV: Firstly, they have to rely on very few sources when they write a story about CCTV. Nobody else than the operators or the police have access to public surveillance footage and the control rooms, and only they know what's going on and who is being filmed and why. As a consequence, always the same people are interviewed by local newspapers, for instance. The same is true for most politicians, there is hardly any political opposition to CCTV. Secondly, CCTV has all the elements of the sort of news that people are interested in: Video surveillance footage has local relevance to those who live close by. So if there are pictures of the local grocery store being robbed, CCTV probably provides great visual information that is very interesting for all the people who live in the area.

CCTV footage is also a perfect fit for TV: it is 'real', it makes the audience believe they are 'right there' on the crime scene. And the fact that only the footage of 'villains' is mediated adds to the audience's perception of the effectiveness of CCTV and gives politicians even more reasons to further extend the camera gaze. For instance, take the London bombings of 2005: The images of the terrorists themselves proved the technology's ineffectiveness in preventing these terrorist acts. However, paradoxically, the repeated mediation of the images made a further extension of CCTV more than acceptable for the public.

Sorry for digressing a bit, but as you can see, in general, CCTV critics haven't usually stood on a strong medial footing in Britain up until now. The strongest critics are mostly academics who deal with the topic scientifically, like criminology professor Clive Norris from the University of Sheffield, or organisations that deal with privacy and civil right matters like Liberty - both of which I've interviewed for the documentary, for instance. Apart from the 'spying aspect' that I have already mentioned, there are other worrying aspects of CCTV. There is a stereotype about any piece of technology that is prevalent in society: its alleged objectivity. Take, for instance, 'smart bombs' that are said to target only operational targets through artificial intelligence.

This is all very well if it works, but what if these 'operational targets' include villages with civilians? The same is true for CCTV: The cameras don't film anyone in the same way. It's human operators that operate public CCTV cameras. And they bring their individual sets of prejudices to their job. In field studies, Norris found out that CCTV operators mainly target young people, mainly men, and especially if they are member of an ethnic minority. They hardly ever look at women at all, unless it is in a voyeuristic context. As a consequence, the groups that are targeted are over-represented in the statistics, which is of course also true for 'normal' police street patrolling.

Professor Norris and his colleague Gary Armstrong also found out that rapid authoritative intervention, one of the key claims in favour of CCTV, was a very very rare event. When

intervention did happen, it was too late in most cases - whatever was observed was already over when the police arrived.

Probably the most devastating criticism of CCTV comes, as I've already mentioned briefly, from the Home Office itself. In several studies it was proven that CCTV is ineffective in things like crime prevention. Crime prevention can be seen as THE key pledge that was made by Conservative government that was struggling with unstoppably rising crime rates when CCTV was introduced in the UK for the first time - and it has later been proven wrong by people who work for the government.

I don't think that there has been a special political agenda, which the people who introduced CCTV widely in the UK wanted to pursue. Fears of an Orwellian state in which every human being is controlled by a central controlling facility are still in the field of science fiction and conspiracy theories. The way in which public CCTV schemes are built up in the UK makes it impossible (at this point in time) to control the cameras and their networks from a central point. Most schemes are controlled locally from a control room that has no connection to other control rooms in the country. There haven't ever been and largely there still aren't clear rules that provide guidelines that determine who can work in a control room and how they should be doing their job.

Though with the increasing digitisation of the surveillance schemes, centralisation will undoubtedly increase, but I still don't think there is any giant political 'master plan' behind this. At the time it was introduced, it probably seemed to be some kind of universal solution to the unstoppable rise in crime for the Conservative government. They relied on unprofessionally led studies that claimed how effective CCTV was. For them, it was certainly manna from heaven at the right time, a way not to lose the next elections on their failure to succeed in their core policy of 'Law & Order'. New Labour, which wanted to be tough on crime, just carried on vigourously with what the Conservatives had started years before.

There were certainly also some other factors that spurred the proliferation of CCTV apart from political reasons. They are also covered in the film. For instance, there was hardly any public opposition from the public or the media at its first massive introduction (in 1994). The reason for this is the case of James Bulger - in 1993, this toddler was kidnapped and killed by two ten-year-olds, and they were captured on a private CCTV camera when they were leaving a shopping mall. Some time later, they killed him brutally aside some train tracks.

The final images of James with his killers were shown on television and printed in newspapers for months. Again, although the murder wasn't prevented with the help of the cameras, the mediation of the images obviously erased any negative implications public CCTV might have both from the public's and from the media's minds.

4. The film compares the UK to its neighbours in mainland Europe. Tell us a little about the differing perspectives in regard to the use of surveillance technologies and how public opinion impacts on political decision making in this area

In the film, the public position on CCTV in the UK is compared with the public opinion in my native country Austria, which can certainly be taken as an example for other central European countries. In Britain, as I've said before, there is hardly any public resistance against CCTV. Video surveillance is seen as providing security, privacy implications or questions about the technology's effectiveness don't come to the mind of most people.

In Austria, the people's position on the topic is much more ambivalent. It has to be mentioned that public video surveillance is still in its infancy in Austria - it has been growing rapidly in recent years, but it is far from being comparable to Britain in the sheer volume of cameras that are there. Most Austrians don't feel safer being watched (but they probably feel safer as most Britons anyway, as there is much less registered crime as in the UK). Many experts say that this difference stems from Austria's (and continental Europe's) experience with authoritarian regimes. Britain has never - or not in recent times - been occupied, there is no experience with totalitarian regimes. The people seem to trust the government much more, which might have to do with the longer, uninterrupted democratic history of Britain.

Others bring forward a completely opposing argument to support the same claim: The United Kingdom is a (constitutional) monarchy, the people are subjects of the crown rather than citizens - they go along with what they're told. I'm still not sure which argument is right since both seem logical to me. However it is clear that Britain has been spared with the experience of the totalitarian Nazi regime, which is still subconsciously persistent in continental Europe's culture and society, and that most certainly does make a difference in the way the people perceive new regulatory measures like video surveillance. Nevertheless, it's always hard to compare apples with oranges. When I think about the reluctance of the British against ID cards, I wonder why they favour CCTV so much.

5. What are your plans for distributing the film, who do you think should see it and how will it add to the debate around privacy and surveillance.

We don't have a deal with a British TV channel yet - I didn't want to send them the film before it is completely finished. However, I am confident that we will get it on air in Britain. It will definitely be part of several film festivals in the UK and elsewhere, we've already had some requests and are now sorting out legal stuff with some of those.

As soon as we have definite dates, we will put them online on the official website EveryStepYouTake.org. I'm not sure if film distributors would be interested in putting it into cinemas as the documentary's one-hour length would be very unusual for a documentary in a cinema - but never say never.

However, nobody has to be worried: At some point in the future, the film will definitely be put on the website for everyone to see. I'm afraid we can't put it online right after it's being finished, because I wouldn't be allowed to submit it to several festivals anymore, according to their rules.

I think the film should definitely be seen by anyone who ever wandered down a British street, wondering if he or she is being watched through a CCTV camera. It should be seen by anyone who ever wondered what the people behind these cameras are thinking and doing - and if this 'something' should make us worry or not. It should be seen by anyone who ever wondered what else those people are looking at.

It will also be of interest for those women who tend to cross a dark park at night, feeling secure due to the protective gaze of the cameras. Car owners, whose auto has ever been robbed right next to a CCTV camera, which was 'not working' at that time, will also be interested in seeing the film. …. I could continue this list for a long time, but let's make a long story short: Anybody who ever asked oneself a "Why?"-question when seeing a CCTV camera should see this film. It will be worthwhile - I promise.

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I hope that the film will help to start a broad public discussion on CCTV in Britain that is long overdue. My goal is reached when members of the audience re-think their own positions on the topic and stop replying the assumptions of others.