

Bombing probe highlights expansion of surveillance

April 19 2013, by David Crary



In this Monday, April 15, 2013, photo, spectators make pictures with camera phones during the Boston Marathon in Boston, before two bombs exploded at the finish line in an attack that killed 3 people and wounded over 170. As the investigation of the Boston Marathon bombings illustrates, getting lost in the crowd is no longer an easy feat. There are eyes -- and cameras-- everywhere. (AP Photo/Kenshin Okubo)

As the investigation of the Boston Marathon bombings illustrates, getting lost in the crowd is no longer an easy feat. There are eyes—and

cameras—everywhere.

Investigators swiftly obtained a vast quantity of amateur photos and videos taken by onlookers, often with their cell phones, as well as extensive footage from [surveillance cameras](#) in the area of Monday's blasts. The FBI released images Thursday from one of those cameras, zeroing in on two men in caps who proved to be the suspects in the case.

One of the men was killed overnight in a [gun battle](#) with police; his brother remained at large Friday.

With the crucial role played by video in the Boston case, surveillance cameras—which have proliferated in London, China and elsewhere—may take on new allure. Informal surveillance by private citizens may proliferate as well; the FBI says it expects the public to be its "eyes and ears."

The upside of this expanding surveillance network is clear—a greater potential for law enforcement to solve crimes and, in some instances, to prevent them. David Antar of New York-based IPVideo Corporation says [video surveillance](#) can be set up to trigger warnings if bags are left unattended or suspicious activity takes place before or during a large-scale event.

Is there a downside?

Some civil libertarians say yes. While they welcome any tools that can help solve a crime as brutal as the bombings, they worry about an irrevocable loss of privacy for anyone venturing into public places.

"It's now harder and harder to go about our lives without being tracked everywhere," said Ben Wizner, a lawyer with the [American Civil Liberties Union](#) who specializes in privacy and technology issues.

"The ACLU doesn't object to cameras at high-profile public places that are potential terrorist targets," he said. "What we do object to is a society in which cameras are so pervasive that we can't go about our lives anywhere without them being recorded and stored in data bases forever."

Within the past decade, the scope of surveillance—both private and government—has increased incalculably. And then there is self-surveillance. Millions of people check in regularly with Foursquare to communicate their whereabouts; many millions more passively enable themselves to be tracked simply by carrying their cell phones.



This image taken from video released by the FBI on Thursday, April 18, 2013 shows what the FBI are calling suspect number 1, front, in black cap, and suspect number 2, in white cap, back right, walking near each other through the crowd in Boston on Monday, April 15, 2013, before the explosions at the Boston Marathon. (AP Photo/FBI)

Photographs and videos can rocket through cyberspace, instantly viewable by strangers on the other side of the world or by law enforcement agencies, courtesy of Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and other social media.

Attitudes toward surveillance and privacy may be shifting. There's a generation of teens and young adults who have grown up with social media and may be more reconciled than older Americans to the prospects of being tracked.

"Americans still cite privacy as one of the core values they cherish, but what's happening is this slow, insidious erosion of it," said Jonathan Turley, a law professor at George Washington University.

"Humans need at times to feel they can exist freely and without constant observation—it is essential to our right to association and expression," he said. "And yet we have a generation being raised in a fishbowl society. They're more tolerant of government surveillance, and that can be a danger to a free society."

Compared to the United States, surveillance cameras are far more pervasive in Britain, where they were first used decades ago to protect against attacks from Irish militants. Up to 4 million or so cameras are now in place, including some around the house of George Orwell, the author of "1984," which foretold of a "Big Brother" society.

Among the British public, the cameras seem to be widely accepted—especially in the aftermath of the 2005 suicide bombings that killed 52 commuters during morning rush-hour traffic in London. Evidence from closed-circuit cameras helped crack that case.

"If you're not doing anything wrong, you have nothing to be worried about," said Joseph Clarke, 32, a London banker. "I'm out all of the time

and I don't even notice them. We need them."

Nonetheless, a London-based organization called Big Brother Watch has been campaigning to cut back on the surveillance network.

"While it provides a sometimes useful tool after an event, it doesn't address the root causes of crime and doesn't protect the public," said the group's director, Nick Pickles. "The public has been desensitized, and so have the perpetrators of crime. The initial deterrent effect has largely disappeared because people just take it for granted."

In the United States, Chicago has the most comprehensive network of surveillance cameras, estimated at more than 10,000. They are mounted on street poles and skyscrapers, aboard buses and in train tunnels; the rail system alone has more than 3,600 cameras.

Police credit the network for thousands of arrests in recent years. After the Boston Marathon bombings, Mayor Rahm Emanuel was quick to tout Chicago's surveillance cameras.

"They serve an important function for the city in providing the type of safety on a day-to-day basis—not just for big events like a marathon," he said.

Police say they get few complaints about the network. And even the local branch of the ACLU says Chicagoans generally seem at peace with the system—except when they get a traffic ticket for a camera-recorded infraction.

Police have not always had their way in expanding surveillance networks. In Washington, D.C, the city council balked at appropriating money in 2008 for a network of more than 5,000 cameras after privacy and civil liberties groups campaigned against the plan.

Attorney Hanni Fakhoury of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, which advocates for online free speech and privacy rights, said the data amassed by police from [surveillance](#) cameras and personal devices has enormous crime-solving potential. But he said there were worrisome questions about how long such data would be stored, and who could access it.

"There seems to be a suggestion, that just by walking in a city square, you give up your rights to be anonymous," he said. "We could stop all sorts of crime ahead of time if we monitored everything everywhere. But do we want to live in that kind of society?"

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