Media, communication and the establishment of public camera surveillance programmes in Canada

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Throughout Europe and North America, policing services, government agencies and private-sector interests have turned increasingly to open-street closed circuit television (CCTV) surveillance to address crime, fear of crime and perceptions of social disorder. In the United Kingdom, where the expansion of video surveillance has far surpassed that of other Western nations, Bournemouth became the first city to implement a permanent public CCTV camera in 1985 (McCahill and Norris, 2002: 9). CCTV surveillance gradually diffused to other towns and cities over the next decade, but it was not until the mid-1990s that public video surveillance became a central feature in the repertory of responses to criminality and crime control. Energized by the Home Office’s City Challenge Competitions and Crime Reduction Programme in 1992, the British government committed close to £5 billion to support public CCTV surveillance systems between 1992 and 2002 (Norris et al., 2004). By 1996, 78 British towns had operational CCTV programmes (Fyfe and Bannister, 1996), and by the end of 1999 the number of towns supporting CCTV monitoring systems had increased to more than 500 (Williams and Johnstone, 2000). Recent estimates indicate that 800 publicly funded

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CCTV systems are operational, supporting more than 40,000 public cameras across the UK (Norris, 2003).³

While socio-cultural analyses of public CCTV surveillance programmes have been based primarily on research conducted in the UK (e.g. Coleman and Sim, 2000; Fyne and Bannister, 1996; McCallie, 2002; Norris, 2003; Norris and Armstrong, 1999; Williams and Johnstone, 2000), contributions from research outside the UK have been limited.⁴ This poses problems for the development of a comprehensive framework capable of accounting for the rise of public CCTV surveillance systems because surveillance processes, and the responses they elicit, occur differently across cultural contexts. The UK is unique in that a centralized form of state funding has persisted since 1992, and this necessarily influences how public monitoring schemes are developed, implemented, studied and explained. Gaining insight into the dynamics involved in the rise of CCTV surveillance in different cultural settings will facilitate comparative understanding of surveillance as a key component of international social policy formation in the 21st century (see Lyon, 2004). It will also facilitate the development of a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of relations involved in establishing public CCTV surveillance systems.

To this end, we develop a set of arguments based on our investigation into the establishment of public camera surveillance programmes in Canada. We begin by arguing that recent contributions to the CCTV surveillance literature have effectively displaced the traditional theoretical reliance on the panopticon by emphasizing the explanatory importance of neoliberal responsibilities and social ordering techniques. We demonstrate, however, that ‘post-panoptic’ (Boyne, 2000) insights into the establishment of monitoring programmes have not advanced completely beyond the determinism reminiscent of the exercise of panoptical power. Intending to supplement the displacement of the panoptic paradigm with a less essentialist framework, we conceptualize the establishment of open-street CCTV monitoring programmes in relation to the central role of media and communications in surveillance policy development and change. Offering empirical data from three Canadian cities, we demonstrate that CCTV surveillance schemes are established on the basis of diverse social interests; that CCTV initiatives may be outright rejected; and that the expansion of existing monitoring programmes may be resisted. We are particularly interested in demonstrating that the promotion of public video surveillance involves citizens who are not necessarily associated with elite partnerships or institutional relations of power playing a more active role than is typically ‘scripted’ for them in popular and academic discourses. These insights are important because they allow us, first, to avoid theoretically the closure on human agency that persists in the CCTV surveillance literature and, second, to better understand the empirical nuances involved in efforts to establish public CCTV monitoring programmes.
Theorizing public camera surveillance

One of the most common scholarly explanations for CCTV surveillance has sought to understand the effects of camera monitoring by using the metaphor of the panopticon (Davis, 1990; Fyfe and Bannister, 1996). An architectural design proposed by Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century to facilitate the supervision of prisoners from a centralized location, the idea of the panoptic prison consisted of an inspection tower surrounded by a semi-circular structure that housed inmates in separate cells. Each cell was to be made available to the uni-directional gaze of the inspectors, and the utility of panoptic supervision was based on assumptions of uncertainty (cf. Lyon, 1991). Since prisoners would not be aware of when inspectors were watching, a state of uncertainty induced by the visible and unverifiable expression of power ensured the normalization of discipline and self-control.

The physical character of contemporary CCTV surveillance understandably invites comparisons to panoptic supervision. Popularized by Foucault’s Discipline and Punish (1979), and resonating strongly in popular media representations, surveillance is regularly understood to involve a small group of people watching over a larger group of people in an asymmetrical relation of power and social control. In their study of Glasgow’s City Watch programme, for example, Fyfe and Bannister note the ubiquity of camera surveillance in everyday city life and argue that CCTV has entailed a ‘general expansion of power, as a new component of a disciplinary network’ (1996: 39) for producing subservient citizen-subjects. Similarly, in his study of the common myths and misconceptions about the democratic potential of new communication technologies, Brignall (2002) contends that online activities such as person-to-person file sharing might appear, at first blush, to emancipate individual users from the hegemonic gaze of corporate Internet Service Providers (ISPs). He argues, however, that digital networks actually facilitate ISP monitoring of users’ electronic communications, and that the ‘new panopticon’ of cyberspace compels users to discipline their online activities by always monitoring where they have been, where they are going and who may be watching. And in his study of communication work and electronic surveillance, Botan (1996) accounts for the rapid growth of electronic surveillance in American workplaces. Taking employees’ perspectives, he argues that workers make sense of management efforts to monitor their productivity in terms of power relations based on an electronic version of the exercise of panoptical power.

While the appeal of the panoptic paradigm in explanations for discipline and social control has been strong, ethnographic research concerned with CCTV control-room activity refutes the utility of applying the panoptic metaphor in an uncritical and totalizing manner (Hier, 2004). One of the most important arguments against the use of the panoptic paradigm is that CCTV does not function as a mechanism to maintain a state of complete ‘societal
visualization’, but rather contributes to the selectivity of social monitoring and, as a corollary, social exclusion (Mc Cahill, 2002; Norris and Armstrong, 1999). Scholarly investigations of CCTV control-room activities demonstrate that, far from the comprehensive gaze of the panoptic prison, where the select few watch over the undifferentiated mass, the surveillance gaze overwhelmingly fixates upon already marginalized individuals and groups: youth, homeless persons, street traders and black/aboriginal men (Mc Cahill, 2002; Norris and Armstrong, 1997; Walby, 2005b).

Displacing the Panoptic Paradigm

Whereas ethnographic research has documented the routine daily applications and effects of CCTV monitoring programmes, a second line of inquiry has sought to understand and explain the processes involved in the establishment of CCTV monitoring schemes (cf. Hier et al., 2006). Influenced by a more general critical body of literature concerned to theorize how the panoptic paradigm has been displaced by mechanisms of consumer seduction as the leading principle of social order, the material and ideological processes involved in the uptake of CCTV surveillance programmes have become key explanatory factors.

Representative of this perspective in the CCTV surveillance literature is Coleman and Sim’s (2000) argument that the establishment of open-street CCTV in Liverpool involved the social construction of ‘moral visions’ oriented towards re-casting and promoting the city as a ‘safe place to do business’ (see also Coleman, 2003a, 2003b, 2005). Drawing on media coverage and interviews with local business and government officials, Coleman and Sim explain how the establishment of Liverpool’s CCTV network involved members of the City Centre Business Partnership constructing and promoting definitions of ‘urban risk’ that would resonate with the public and reverberate in new crime control policies. They conceptualize the establishment of Liverpool’s CCTV surveillance programme in terms of neoliberal patterns of consumption and leisure to argue that Liverpool’s monitoring programme was predicated on business interests of ‘attracting capital and people of the right sort’ (2000: 626). This sequence of processes, Coleman and Sim continue, functioned as ‘social ordering strategies’ which ‘sorted’ responsibilized and prudent individual-consumers from undesirable outsiders, the latter necessitating containment, control and, ultimately, symbolic expurgation from the imaginary boundaries of the city. They maintain that local elites, acting in consort, capitalized on effective coalition-building and a priori privileged media access. This enabled the elites, say Coleman and Sim, to construct visions of urban renewal involving the marginalization of undesirable individuals whose images and identities could not be reconciled with the new, consumer-friendly post-industrial Liverpool. Coleman and Sim conclude that
a ‘consensual world-view’ (2000: 636) pertaining to the implementation of Liverpool’s CCTV programme was consolidated on the basis of what amounted to structural-cultural advantage in the primary definition or preferred framing of urban risk and moral turpitude.

Coleman and Sim’s analysis offers an important step forward in the CCTV surveillance literature for at least two reasons. First, their analysis effectively displaces the panoptic paradigm by exploring the discursive processes through which CCTV schemes are consolidated. They provide a valuable case study concerned with the material and ideological dimensions of establishing CCTV programmes, and they shift analytical attention away from the technological effects or applications of CCTV surveillance to prioritize the human interactions involved in establishing monitoring programmes. Second, their interview data illustrate that business/elite interests occupy an important position in establishing and maintaining CCTV surveillance programmes. Not only does this address consumerism as a significant dimension of public camera surveillance schemes, but it also suggests that monitoring programmes are tied to relations of power, privilege and social advantage.

Notwithstanding these important and progressive insights, however, Coleman and Sim’s framework is also problematic for at least three interrelated empirical, theoretical and political reasons. By focusing attention to how local elite partnerships are constructed on the basis of ideological and material interests, first, they neglect the identities and possible roles played by non-elite actors in CCTV surveillance programmes. Following Norris and Armstrong (1997), they contend that CCTV surveillance entails the exercise of power with ‘a number of dimensions’ (2000: 624). Yet, on the basis of their methodological strategies (i.e. interviews with official sources exclusively), they attend overwhelmingly to how the ‘new business elite’ collaborates with police and political officials to further their material interests at the expense of ‘undesirable’ others. The promotion of CCTV programmes, however, sometimes involves the participation of non-official actors (e.g. citizens’ initiative groups) whose interests and goals may or may not be consistent with the interests of official institutional actors. If we are to develop a comprehensive understanding of the complex processes involved in the promotion of public CCTV surveillance systems, we must be prepared to investigate these alternative, and potentially oppositional, points of communication and social action.

On a theoretical level, and second, the validity of Coleman and Sim’s analysis remains contingent on a ‘leap of faith’ concerning the extent to which a single (consumer) subject position was constituted in light of what may conceivably have been perceived by the public as the erosion of personal privacy and infringements on the right to enjoy the unobstructed use of public space. As Hier and colleagues (Hier, 2004; Hier et al., 2006) explain, by relying on the explanatory purchase of the claims-making activities of primary definers, they invest power in the specific ideological contents of elite/media...
discourses. Not only does this reproduce the same kind of subject determinism found in asymmetrical conceptions of the exercise of panoptical power, but it also ignores the significance of possible counter-discourses, acts of resistance and, ultimately, the potential failure of responsibilization strategies to consolidate and maintain high levels of ‘public consent’ (for an example of similar theoretical problems, see also Coleman, 2005).

And third, politically, Coleman and Sim pursue a line of inquiry that essentially limits neoliberalism to an instrumental, materialist project devoted to the expansion of capitalist relations through the promotion of consumerist ideology. As Coleman and Sim argue:

The cameras were therefore crucial to … the ‘social construction of suspicion’ – a process that was increasingly left to emergent ‘primary definers’ from the private sector. This involved an instrumental drive that prioritized profit and loss underpinned by the construction of a preferred and particular moral order built on the politics of inclusionary respectability and exclusionary otherness. (2000: 629, emphasis added)

[A]gents and agencies of the neo-liberal state are constructing the boundaries and possibilities of the new urban frontier while simultaneously engaging in a project of social control that will have far-reaching consequences for how we understand the meanings of public space, social justice, and the parameters of state power. (Coleman, 2003a: 12, emphasis added)

While they acknowledge that the production of ‘moral visions’ is central to neoliberal projects, the moral dimensions of neoliberalism are reduced to epiphenomena of private capital. In contrast to more complex formulations that conceptualize neoliberalism as entailing ongoing processes with contingent outcomes (e.g. Hall, 1988), Coleman and Sim conceptualize neoliberalism generally, and CCTV surveillance specifically, as part of a coherent state strategy aimed at re-establishing (or consolidating) the conditions for sustained capitalist accumulation. We dispute neither that neoliberalism is a state project nor that it is a political project with important material dimensions. We qualify this argument, however, with the stipulation that neoliberalism involves complex, contradictory, multivalent political and empirical configurations, not the straightforward implementation of a unified or coherent framework that is imposed resolutely ‘from above’.

Media, communication and the establishment of public camera surveillance programmes

As with other public policy issues, CCTV surveillance becomes invested with social meaning and significance through the many ways that problems and solutions are constructed, understood, contested, and modified by a diverse group of claims-makers. The role of mainstream news and popular media is
of marked importance. Media outlets construct and purvey the symbols, myths and images that embody and represent social problems (e.g. anti-social behaviours, acts of terrorism). Moralizing images of crime and deviance, in turn, signify social disorder or threat through the constitution of certain subject positions (e.g. ‘street thugs’, ‘fundamentalist Muslims’). These representational processes involve the mediation of a narrow range of images that are used to justify or rationalize the institutionalization and, at times, the intensification of surveillance schemes, specifying how socially constructed problems become ‘knowable’ only when they have been subject to the limits and modalities of discursive formations.

Prior to, and contemporaneous with, the production of rationalizing and legitimizing discourses, however, images or typifications of problems and issues also result from definitional struggles among stakeholder groups with different interests and goals. Although these groups may seek to influence public policy and/or public opinion in some way, they are not all driven by materialist or instrumental objectives, nor do they all enjoy institutional positions of power and influence. News outlets become important to public CCTV surveillance projects because of the privileged space these media occupy as cultural fields of struggle where contending interests and different levels of power and influence compete to define the nature of problems and issues, as well as their preferred solutions.7

Many studies that address the establishment of public CCTV surveillance systems acknowledge the importance of news media as an arena where powerful groups attempt to secure hegemony (e.g. Coleman and Sim, 2000; Gill, 2003; McCahill, 2002; Norris and Armstrong, 1999). One common problem emerging from these studies, however, is that they reproduce some of the essentialist tendencies found in earlier radical accounts of news production and primary definition (for an example of an early account, see Hall et al., 1978). A substantial body of research in the political sociology of news media has demonstrated that, even when powerful actors participate in hegemonic campaigns, the definitional field is a differentiated and contested space (Ericson et al., 1989; Greenberg, 2005; Miller, 1993). While it is true that news media are key sites in hegemonic struggles, and that news discourses regularly articulate the interests of powerful actors, non-official actors, including members of social movement organizations and NGOs (non-governmental organizations), also have the capability to take control of primary definitions (Schlesinger, 1990). In this regard, theoretical arguments pertaining to structural or cultural advantage as the independent variable in mediated definitional struggles are simply insufficient to explain the dynamics of framing contests over social problems and public policies.

In what follows, we present data from our wider study of public camera surveillance in Canada. We do so to address important theoretical and methodological issues regarding the politics of signification and the communicative dynamics involved in the establishment of public camera surveillance
schemes. Our arguments are based on ongoing comparative content and discourse analyses of news coverage and policy documents, minutes from city council meetings, the results from a Canada-wide police survey, and interviews with government officials, police, business representatives, members of citizens’ groups and journalists. We present three short case studies to demonstrate the greater complexity of roles and relationships that exist among stakeholder groups in efforts to establish public camera surveillance systems. We also illustrate how citizens who are commonly understood to exist outside the parameters of definitional power and privilege are not always passive recipients of dominant news framing. While we do not contend that these case studies completely account for the empirical contingencies involved in the promotion of public monitoring programmes, they usefully identify avenues of research that help to supplement the displacement of the panoptic paradigm in studies of public CCTV surveillance.

CCTV surveillance from the ground up

We begin by examining the communicative relations involved in the establishment of the City of London’s (Ontario, Canada) Downtown Camera Project. The City of London (population: 430,000) is located in southwestern Ontario, situated midway between the Canada–US border at Detroit and the City of Toronto (approximately 200 km each way). The Downtown Camera Project became operational on 9 November 2001. Inspired by the perceived success of the City of Sudbury’s (Ontario, Canada) Eye in the Sky Monitoring Program, the London project was implemented under the official guise of providing and maintaining a safe environment for citizens and businesses in the downtown core, and of deterring and/or improving the ability of police to respond to crime and anti-social behaviour (Corporation of the City of London, 2001). The City of London is responsible for operating the 16-camera system, Canada’s largest public monitoring system at the time of writing. The establishment of London’s monitoring programme, however, was significantly influenced by a citizen-led initiative.

The promotion of the Downtown Camera Project was set into motion following the stabbing murder of 20-year-old Michael Goldie-Ryder outside a downtown bar in the early hours of 16 January 1999. The murder came to symbolize social disorder in the downtown area, the implications of which we address below, and it led to the formation of Friends Against Senseless Endings (FASE). FASE is a grassroots citizens’ organization devoted to resisting community violence through education and awareness, as well as pressuring government for legislative change pertaining to criminal assaults involving knives. Spearheaded by family and friends of Goldie-Ryder, FASE was instrumental in raising the funds and community support necessary to launch the monitoring programme.
In 1999, members of FASE, in consort with members of the Downtown Safety Committee, initiated a two-year anti-violence campaign that led to the establishment of public CCTV surveillance in downtown London. They succeeded on the basis of a repertoire of political and communications activities. Among these activities were open-forum discussions and presentations to students at local high schools; meetings with national advisory groups, such as the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (whom members of FASE successfully lobbied to demand increased criminal penalties for crimes involving knives); lobbying efforts to persuade the City of London’s Community and Protective Services Board to cover outstanding costs for the monitoring programme; and a sustained letter-writing campaign to local news outlets to draw attention to violent crime on London’s streets, as well as to FASE’s proposed and preferred solutions. In conjunction with a London-area school board, members of FASE also organized a ‘walk against violence’ on 16 May 2001 to honour the memory of Goldie-Ryder (Miner, 2001: A2). In what it was hoped would become the annual ‘Goldie-Ribbon’ Campaign, the walk against violence initially raised CDN $10,000 to support CCTV surveillance in the city. By November 2001, FASE had garnered enough publicity to raise the necessary funds and levels of community support for the city to officially launch the Downtown Camera Project.

The practical and symbolic role that FASE played in the ascension of CCTV surveillance in London indicates that the establishment of public video monitoring programmes is not always based on top-down elite initiatives involving strategies for the ‘responsibilization’ of prudent consumers. Immediately following the attack on Goldie-Ryder, for example, Sergeant John O’Flaherty of the London Police Service declared: ‘The downtown, other than that area [where Goldie-Ryder was murdered], is a safe place to be…. There’s weapons and there’s testosterone and there’s booze’ (Berton, 1999: A1). Councillor Joe Swan, chair of the City Hall Committee to Revitalize Downtown London, stated in response to the murder: ‘This is not about location but a violent act that took place in our society’ (Brown and Yavinski, 1999: 1). And London’s then-mayor, Dianne Hasket, responded to the murder by lobbying the federal government to tighten penalties in the Criminal Code of Canada for carrying concealed weapons, rather than pushing for the implementation of CCTV surveillance in the downtown core (Brown and Yavinski, 1999: 1). Despite these initial reactions from police and city representatives, however, the momentum garnered by FASE was strong enough to consolidate support for the Downtown Camera Project within three years of Goldie-Ryder’s murder (see also Hier et al., 2006).

In the time that elapsed between his murder and the activation of the camera programme, Michael Goldie-Ryder was repeatedly referenced in local news reporting about an array of problematic issues and events affecting the City of London’s downtown core. Following Goldie-Ryder’s murder, the London Free Press linked the murder to a rash of killings, to an escalating situation, and to
an immediate need to clamp down on violence in the downtown core. Soon, the grievance against Goldie-Ryder’s murderer was extended to risk factors such as bank robberies, purse-snatching and random assaults, particularly risks facing women and the elderly (e.g. Beaubien, 1999a: A3; Herbert, 2001a: B2), and Goldie-Ryder’s murder was consistently referenced to signify social disorder and public risk in the core (Hier, 2004). During this period of time, Goldie-Ryder’s mother, Deborah Goldie-Ryder, also found her own voice as a media activist. Publishing an op-ed article in the London Free Press, she challenged critics who questioned whether the cost of a camera programme was justified. She argued that, at a cost of $1.06 per resident, the programme was a ‘small price to pay to help make our streets safer’, proclaiming ‘he did not die for nothing’ (Goldie-Ryder, 2000b: F2; see also Goldie-Ryder, 2000a: A10).

The communication and policy significance of the FASE campaign, as well as the media reaction to Goldie-Ryder’s murder, is particularly salient in the context of the murder of Jamie Williamson. Williamson was a young father engaged to be married when he was stabbed to death in 1995 on a downtown London street corner. Williamson’s death was dramatically recounted in the London Free Press on the day London Police Service activated its downtown CCTV system:

We will never forget how at the corner of Dundas and Richmond streets, Tom Williamson found his son Jamie in a pool of blood. In the darkness of a March night, 22-year-old Jamie Williamson gasped his last breath. In the days that followed, Londoners bemoaned downtown decay, deterioration of societal values and the loss of a city’s innocence. Those frustrations had been expressed before, but it was not until that night of March 18, 1995, that they came together as sharply as the tip of a knife. (London Free Press, 2001: A10)

After Williamson’s murder in 1995, politicians and police promised changes to improve downtown safety, beginning with a meeting that included a wide range of groups representing people who live or worked in the core (Sher, 1999: A3). Williamson was largely forgotten, however, until Goldie-Ryder’s death four years later. In other words, it was only in the context of Goldie-Ryder’s murder, and the public emotions evoked by FASE, that Williamson’s murder was articulated as a problem signifying risk and danger in the core.

Recent contributions to the literature on media and international law and order politics have affirmed that existing disparities between perceptions of criminogenic risks and actual experiences of victimization necessitate explaining public understandings of, and mobilization against, social disorder in terms of symbolic constructions of social space (e.g. Haggerty, 2003; Karstedt, 2002). As Innes (2004) argues, crime and anti-social behaviours are usefully understood as mass-mediated communicative events that signal how people interpret ‘risky’ spaces, places and social encounters. Maintaining that some crimes/disorders are more significant to individual and collective perceptions of risk, he contends that normative transgressions, which are especially visible
to the public, function as ‘warning signals’ for the contingencies of everyday life. As the establishment of London’s camera project suggests, there also exists an interaction effect, whereby criminal acts acquire new meaning and significance in the context of different policy and advocacy settings. Placing an explanatory emphasis on the contingent or situational semiotic qualities of crime and social disorder not only avoids the tendency to reduce public understandings of crime to a stable, singular experience or phenomenon, then, but it also addresses how the mediation of criminogenic risk can evoke a variety of emotional responses (e.g. sympathy, anger, outrage) to certain critical incidents. As the reaction to FASE suggests, such responses, and the self-reflexivity they foster, are not based simply on the dissemination of information about crime, but also on the aesthetic and symbolic dimensions to perceptions of crime and disorder that are shaped by emotions such as compassion and sympathy for victims and their families – what Boltanski (1999) conceptualizes as ‘distant suffering’.

Therefore, the example of the Downtown Camera Project illustrates how the establishment of public monitoring programmes is not always based on top-down initiatives to responsibilize prudent consumers in public space. In making this claim, however, we do not wish to suggest that business and other elite partners demonstrated a lack of interest in funding the London cameras. Of the CND $235,000 that was used to launch the Downtown Camera Project, CND $43,000 was donated by London’s Downtown Business Association. Another six donors – the Hampton Group, the London Free Press, Ceeps & Barney’s, Aboutown Transportation Ltd, the London Police Services Board and the University of Western Ontario Board of Governors – pledged CND $12,500 to cover the cost of one camera. And the Bank of Nova Scotia, where Debra Goldie-Ryder worked, contributed CND $24,000 (Matyas, 2001: A3). What we are suggesting is that business partnerships and members of elite networks do not always single-handedly drive efforts to establish monitoring programmes, and that successful establishment efforts do not always involve elite primary definitions. In the two case studies to follow, we illustrate how police and business may take an active role in promoting CCTV, but we argue that neither are efforts to achieve a preferred diagnostic and prognostic framing of issues straightforward processes of primary definition, nor do police and business always share the same interests and goals. The case studies also illustrate how non-elite primary definitions shape public discourse on CCTV surveillance, and how efforts to establish and expand CCTV surveillance programmes may be contested, resisted and rejected.

Rejecting CCTV surveillance

The first of our two examples is based on efforts to establish a monitoring programme in the City of Brockville (Ontario, Canada). The City of Brockville
(population: 21,000) is located along the St Lawrence River, approximately 100 km south of Ottawa, Canada’s capital city, and approximately an hour’s drive from the Canada–US border at New York State. The proposal for CCTV surveillance in Brockville is significant because the city is one of a small number of Canadian locations where a public monitoring initiative has been defeated. Furthermore, Brockville is the only city, to our knowledge, where a proposal has been defeated based on a critical editorial campaign spearheaded by journalists working for the local press, combined with, or in addition to, a volatile manifestation of civic resistance.

The initiative to propose public CCTV surveillance in Brockville came from the Chief of Police.10 After becoming aware of public video surveillance in Sudbury, Ontario, as well as in Hull, Quebec and Ipswich, UK, Police Chief Barry King applied on behalf of the city for a Proceeds of Crime/Frontline Policing provincial government grant to implement a public CCTV monitoring programme. Under the auspices of the Safe Community Coalition (SCC), Chief King requested a sum of CND $158,000 to install 8–10 cameras to monitor 15 city blocks in the downtown core. According to King, the aims of the camera system were to lower vandalism, reduce the prevalence of break-and-enters, respond to altercations in the bar district, and identify suspects and stolen vehicles.11

In December 1998, the Ontario Minister of the Solicitor General approved a grant of CND $70,000 under the Futuristic Crime Prevention Initiative programme. This grant enabled the SCC to develop a proposal that would see 3–5 cameras implemented under the auspices of the Safe Streets Program. On 19 January 1999 Police Chief King presented the Safe Streets proposal to the City’s Economic Development and Community Services Committee (CEDCSC), the latter comprising three city representatives. King’s presentation, and the accompanying Safe Streets Programme: CCTV Surveillance of the Downtown Core report, boasted of operational efficiency in an era of fiscal restraint and laid claim to the potential utility of the cameras in addressing social issues including violence, vandalism and aggressive panhandling. The proposal called for cameras to be monitored live from the police station by ‘911 Dispatchers’, and it stipulated that recordings would be stored for 60 days. Based on the presentation and report, the CEDCSC voted 2 to 1 in favour of establishing a monitoring programme in Brockville.

By the time the Safe Streets proposal was endorsed by the CEDCSC, several critical news articles addressing CCTV surveillance in Brockville had appeared in the local newspaper, the Recorder and Times. Under such headlines as ‘Are City Residents Ready for Big Brother?’ (Philips, 1998), ‘Invading Our Spaces’ (Coward, 1998), ‘There’s a Better Way to Keep Our Downtown Safe’ (Maclean, 1998), ‘Cop Better than Camera’ (Mather, 1998), ‘We Don’t Need Video Surveillance’ (Taylor, 1999), and ‘Cameras Should Be Last Resort’ (Recorder and Times, 1999a), the Safe Streets proposal was scrutinized in two, interrelated ways. The first identified a perceived need to have
a greater police presence in the downtown core. The editorial board of the 
Recorder and Times had decided that video surveillance represented a poor 
substitute for community policing.\textsuperscript{12} This decision was based on the fact that 
the city council had struggled with the Police Service Board for several years 
prior to 1999 over maintaining a police presence on downtown streets; also, 
the city had funded a CND $10 million revitalization project spanning the 
years 1998–2004 that focused on street lighting and visibility.\textsuperscript{13} In a series of 
daily editorials and newspaper articles, 10–26 January 1999, the editorial 
board and staff writers made it clear that the Police Service had received a 
second grant through the Ontario Community Policing Partnership Program 
that would see the hiring of two new ‘downtown beat patrol officers’. The 
position of the editorial board is captured in the following query: ‘how much 
more money is council going to keep committing to the so-called crime prob-
lem at a time the crime rate is falling across Canada, including Brockville?’ 
(Recorder and Times, 1999b: A6).

The second way that the Recorder and Times represented the Safe Streets 
proposal was through a hybrid discourse, pitting small-town community pri-
vacy against big-city intrusive state surveillance. In contrast to Coleman and 
Sim’s (2000) finding that alliances were forged between local media and 
policing agencies in the process of establishing CCTV surveillance in 
Liverpool, the editorial board of the Recorder and Times used a discourse of 
‘Big Brother policing’ as a proxy for the erosion of small-town community 
living. Although the newspaper published two letters to the editor that sup-
ported the Safe Streets proposal, the editorial board adopted a critical stance 
in relation to the Safe Streets Program. For example, after questioning both 
the privacy-related ethics and cost-effectiveness of the proposal, editor David 
Taylor challenged the Police Chief’s claims to problem behaviour in the 
downtown core: ‘King Street is hardly the Paris Commune. Where’s the 
apprehended insurrection that requires full-time video surveillance?’ 
(Recorder and Times, 1999a: A6). A local criminal lawyer also took advan-
tage of the availability of column space: ‘such cameras get one thinking of 
Big Brother and 1984. The thought of law-abiding people being spied upon 
in an outdoor public place is rather ominous’ (Mather, 1998: A7, original 
emphases). Letters to the editor expressed the view that increasing the use of 
technological quick-fix to address perceived social problems was ‘an abdi-
cation of duty and an admission of not being able to cope with the problems’ 
and ‘a colossal waste of money’ (Gillard and Gillard, 1999: A6). But the most 
emphatic opposition came directly from the editorial board: ‘A living, breath-
ing human, exercising the good judgment of a well-trained police constable is 
light years ahead of a student sitting five kilometers away watching through 
the blinkered lens of a video camera’ (Recorder and Times, 1999a: A6).\textsuperscript{14}

Following the CEDCSC’s endorsement of the Safe Streets proposal, it was 
not necessary for the Police Service to secure the consent of city council 
before moving ahead with the CCTV proposal. Members of the Police
Services Board, however, believed that council approval would legitimize the programme, and that council members could provide community input. Brockville’s Mayor, Ben TeKamp, who was supportive of the proposal, also called for council approval following the critical articles and editorials published in the Recorder and Times. As Mazur and Lee (1993) note, news media not only identify issues for public discussion, but also frame the context in which issues and concerns are thought about, represented, contested and reconfigured. In this regard, news media can be understood as a forum for bringing social issues to public attention, as well as a mediated space where language, imagery and claims shape the ways in which people think about salient issues and concerns. While we are not able to determine the exact extent to which the coverage on CCTV influenced public opinion in Brockville, public reaction leading up to city council’s vote on the Safe Streets proposal (outlined below) is suggestive.

The city council was scheduled to meet on 26 January 1999, when they would vote on the Safe Streets proposal. In the week leading up to council’s vote, city councillors remained evenly divided on the CCTV proposal. Days before the meeting, however, city councillors and the mayor were inundated with an estimated 500 phone calls from Brockville citizens who expressed concern with the implications of implementing camera monitoring in the downtown core (The Gazette, 1999: A12). The night before the meeting, for instance, city councillor Jason Baker fielded phone calls for two straight hours, and Mayor Ben TeKamp took 32 calls at his home. The callers objected to state surveillance in their small community (Monaghan, 1999: A3). According to Police Chief King and one city councillor, the reaction exemplifies the power of the press, which forged and forced public opinion on the CCTV proposal. Regardless, the efforts of the callers were enough to secure a unanimous ‘no’ vote against implementing the open-street CCTV initiative (the vote was taken on 26 January 1999).

Possibly due to the fact that the SCC’s proposal was adjudicated less than a month following its inception, an official, organized Brockville citizens’ movement failed to materialize (or at least failed to appear openly in public). As we noted previously, it is not clear if the phone calls and letters to the editor were based on the actions of an organized grassroots movement or if they merely represented spontaneous acts of individual dissent. What is clear is that these indicators of citizen resistance to the CCTV proposal did not surface publicly until the Recorder and Times published concerns about the proposal. It is also apparent that support on the city council for the project was evenly divided in the week leading up to the vote on the SCC’s proposal. Indeed, the drive to establish CCTV surveillance in Brockville demonstrates how, in the absence of a clearly articulated policy position, local authorities may be vulnerable to sustained and critical media attention. News media will not always fulfil its ‘fourth estate’ role as protector of the public interest and watchdog of powerful institutions and groups. However, in the context of a
poorly articulated rationale for introducing public camera surveillance, a space in which alternative definitions of the issue can be expressed without sufficient challenge is more likely to occur. And in the absence of a ‘signal crime’ or other event that could be used to galvanize public support, there was no resonant moment around which public outrage and fear could mobilize. Faced with an active media proffering oppositional and alternative frames, and at least the perception of growing public concern about the efficacy of the proposed course of action, the SCC retracted the proposal.

Resisting the expansion of CCTV surveillance

If the rejection of Brockville’s CCTV surveillance proposal can be conceptualized as compound and diffuse, efforts to resist the expansion of CCTV surveillance in the City of Peterborough (Ontario, Canada) represent an example of organized and targeted resistance. Peterborough (population: 78,000), located in the Kawartha cottage region of north-central Ontario, equidistant between Toronto (approximately two hours to the west) and Ottawa (to the east), has run a public CCTV programme since 2001. The city operates 12 cameras, which monitor the local marina, museum, library and the city’s Millennium Park (Peesker, 2005). Although the cameras are neither manually controlled nor monitored live, the Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario was forced to review Peterborough’s compliance with provincial guidelines for the operation of CCTV systems following 20 registered complaints in June 2004 (Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario, 2004). The attention that this attracted from the Privacy Commissioner in the summer of 2004 is not insignificant; as we explain below, the complaints were part of a wider effort to resist the expansion of CCTV surveillance in the city.

On 9 December 2003, the Peterborough Restaurant and Bar Association, in accordance with its ‘zero-tolerance policy’ towards anti-social behaviour in the downtown core, recommended the expansion of video surveillance by establishing a downtown security camera system. A motion to bring a formal proposal before city council was passed by the Peterborough Downtown Business Improvement Association’s (PDBIA) Board of Management and Vandalism Committee. On 16 February 2004, the Executive Director of the PDBIA, Walter Johnstone, presented a proposal to the city council that would see the expansion of ‘closed-circuit security camera’ surveillance into the downtown core. The proposal cited the success of video surveillance in London and Sudbury, Ontario, and the PDBIA offered to pay CND $85,000 to purchase equipment and instal cameras at five intersections in downtown Peterborough. The proposal not only sought to expand the number of cameras monitoring public space in the city, it also called for 24-hour coverage of the city’s business and entertainment district (monitored by existing city staff). Among other
things, the proposal identified vandalism, petty crime, public urination, graffiti, litter and aggressive panhandling as problems requiring surveillance in the downtown core (Sherk, 2004: 2). Although the PDBIA was expected to pay the initial costs of purchasing the equipment, the report to council stipulated that taxpayers would cover all operational and maintenance costs.

Following Johnstone’s presentation to the city council, the proposal was approved in principle. Concerned about costs, effectiveness and privacy issues, however, city councillors appointed the city’s Central Area Facilitator, Lance Sherk, to work with the PDBIA and the city’s Planning and Development Services Department to produce a comprehensive assessment of expanding security cameras, and to provide specific recommendations to council for the expansion of CCTV surveillance in Peterborough. The report (Sherk, 2004) summarizes the results of two public consultations. The first public consultation involved community information forums. Four community forums were held in May and June 2004. According to the report, the four meetings attracted between 15 and 30 people. The meetings were designed as information sessions to inform members of the public why the PDBIA wishes to expand video surveillance in the city, as well as to review the Ontario government’s Guidelines for Using Video Surveillance Cameras in Public Places (Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario, 2001). The second public consultation involved a survey of the downtown business area. According to the report, the survey was distributed on 11 March 2004. Of the 483 surveys sent to downtown business and property owners, only 59 surveys were returned (12%). Of the respondents, 49 respondents (83%) supported the expansion of video surveillance (Sherk, 2004: 10). The survey was also distributed by representatives of the Peterborough Chamber of Commerce (comprising 820 members). Approximately 6 percent of the constituents responded, with an approval rate of approximately 80 percent (Sherk, 2004: 10).

Throughout the public consultation and data gathering process (February–May 2004), concerns pertaining to privacy, effectiveness, cost and motive were frequently articulated in the local press, the Peterborough Examiner. The Peterborough Examiner ran seven opinion pieces or letters to the editor and seven hard news articles between 15 January and 17 June 2004. Similar concerns were articulated by city councillors when the proposal was approved in principle, and it was these concerns that motivated councillors to commission the report. In sharp contrast to London, Ontario, however, where the murder of a young person precipitated the formation of a sustained grassroots advocacy campaign, no event of equal public significance had occurred in Peterborough. And, in contrast to Brockville, where an accelerated decision-making process provided little time for the crystallization of citizen opposition but raised opportunities for sustained and critical media attention, the consultation process in Peterborough afforded local interest groups time to effectively mount public resistance to the expansion of video surveillance.
Resistance to the business-led camera initiative came principally from the Stop The Cameras Coalition (STCC), an alliance of the Council of Canadians, the Social Justice Coalition, the Peterborough New Democratic Party, the Peterborough Coalition Against Poverty (PCAP) and other concerned citizens. The STCC staged an effective communications campaign that entailed actions designed to undermine the rationale for the camera initiative and ultimately defeat its final approval at the city council. The STCC used three strategies to resist the expansion of CCTV surveillance in Peterborough, the first of which was to maintain a visible presence at the four community forums. In fact, of the 15–30 people reported to have attended meetings, a significant portion was identified in the Planning and Development Service’s Committee report to be affiliated with the STCC. At the meetings, members of the STCC held Lance Sherk to account for claims made in the report. For example, at the final forum meeting, held on 17 June 2004, Sherk was publicly pressed to answer questions about the relationship between CCTV surveillance and crime reduction; about the composition of the Vandalism Committee that originally brought forward the idea of expanding CCTV surveillance; and about the long-term costs of maintaining the system (Peesker, 2004).

The STCC’s second strategy was to gather data on, and attempt to sway, public opinion. For example, on 29 April 2004 representatives held a public information and debate session. Jane Burns of the STCC invited members of the PDBIA to debate openly the merits of public video surveillance. The request was refused (Peterborough Examiner, 2004). Members of the STCC also collected a petition with over 1000 signatures opposing the cameras, and they conducted a survey of local businesses. Volunteers visited 110 businesses in the downtown core to ask three simple questions: Do you support the cameras? Do you oppose the cameras? Undecided? (Peterborough Stop the Camera Coalition, 2004: 7) Their data indicate that 20 percent of respondents supported cameras, 54 percent opposed the cameras and 26 percent were undecided (2004: 7). The STCC also developed a website that greets views with blinking eyes and a caption reading: ‘Do you like feeling as if you’re being watched all the time? We don’t.’ The site provides the phone number for the PDBIA and encourages readers to voice their concern, and it provides contact information for city representatives.

While the first two communication strategies were significant in resistance efforts, the most influential strategy involved submitting a counter-report to council on 12 October 2004 (Sherk, 2004). The report offers research findings on costs of the cameras, on the lack of effectiveness, and on abuse and privacy violations. More damaging, the STCC report addresses directly the claims made in Sherk’s report. The STCC report criticizes the report for failing to substantiate the need for CCTV surveillance; for remaining indeterminate on long-term costs to maintain the system; for offering invalid data on the support of downtown business; and on a flawed community forum.
process. The STCC report concludes that surveillance cameras are not the answer to Peterborough’s alleged problems, and that the results of Sherk’s report lack credibility.

Faced with growing dissent, as well as the council’s unwillingness to endorse the expansion without further consultation, the PDBIA considered unilateral action by instituting a private surveillance scheme, which would be paid for entirely by and responsible only to local merchants. This raised the ire of the Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario, who subsequently registered opposition to any non-statutory policing initiatives (Peesker, 2005: B1). Sherk’s final recommendation was for a designated committee of stakeholders from the city, DBIA and STCC to be assembled (Sherk, 2004). This new committee would be responsible for investigating alternatives to cameras, defining further the need for monitoring downtown and, if cameras were ever agreed to be necessary, the form this scheme should take. At the time of writing, the committee had met only one time and failed to reach agreement. The expansion of a public camera surveillance programme is not currently being considered in Peterborough.

Conclusion: beyond responsibilization and social ordering

In this article, we have demonstrated how theoretical explanations emphasizing responsibilization strategies and social ordering techniques have hitherto failed to cast off from the determinism reminiscent of the exercise of panoptical power. We argued that progressive contributions to the establishment of CCTV surveillance schemes have displaced the panoptic metaphor, but they have not supplanted the logic of panoptical power with other, less deterministic and more comprehensive explanatory alternatives. By emphasizing the importance of communications and media processes in the establishment of CCTV surveillance schemes, and by presenting a selection of empirical data, we have identified ways of rethinking the empirical contingencies of public CCTV surveillance beyond responsibilization and social ordering. Of course, police and local government authorities still play a fundamental role in shaping the truth claims articulated in and consolidated by news media, and definitional contests are still ‘structured in dominance’ (Schlesinger, 1990). However, our case studies illustrate that non-official sources can play an active role in the definitional field of public policy communication. The extent to which claims-making shapes the outcomes of public surveillance debates is determined by a unique constellation of empirical contingencies in specific locales, not a priori relations of power.

The implications of our analyses are significant for wider socio-cultural understandings of crime control policy. In one of the most comprehensive and influential syntheses of contemporary crime control processes, David Garland (2001) identifies two broad, interrelated sets of changes taking place in contemporary modes of criminal justice administration. The first pertains
to changes in the political culture of crime control. He contends that the last few decades have been marked by an increase in the ‘emotionalization’ of crime, characterized by discourses of victim-centredness and ‘social defense’, as well as the prioritization of situational crime prevention as predominant rationalities for crime control and criminal governance. For Garland, higher crime rates have become accepted as a normal ‘social fact’ of everyday life in most Western societies (2001: 106), and a more generalized ‘crime complex’ has developed, involving new ways of acting on claims of high levels of crime, fear of crime and public safety concerns.

Interlaced with changes in the politics of crime control have been transformations in the dynamics involved in the development of crime control policy. Since 1970, Garland explains, the motif of ‘fear of crime’ has taken on a new discursive and bureaucratic importance, to the extent that it is now regarded as a problem in and of itself. He contends that older forms of penal welfarism sought to explain criminality on the basis of social deprivation and volitional theories of crime, but that contemporary law-and-order politics embodies new social interests that increasingly prioritize preventive crime-control strategies. For Garland, the dynamics of contemporary crime-control policies are increasingly oriented towards reducing fear of crime rather than actual crime, and they rely to an increasing extent on populist discourses of potential victims, symbolic politics and public/community safety initiatives in the production of social order and social control (Hier et al., 2006).

Garland’s general insights are useful in conceptualizing the emotional and discursive dimensions of the establishment of CCTV monitoring programmes, insofar as they help to abstract the locus of explanation from the specificity of individual monitoring programmes and relocate it in a broader politico-cultural context. Not only does his argument help to address the political dimensions in the diffusion of CCTV surveillance for preventive/situational crime control, but it also speaks to the necessity of theorizing the dynamics involved in the proliferation of public CCTV surveillance schemes internationally. The difficulty that emerges in Garland’s explanation, however, is that it reproduces a theoretical framework that prioritizes top-down responsibilization strategies and the ability of elite partners and security experts to ‘interpolate the citizen as a potential victim’ (2001: 125) through media reporting and elite-engineered publicity campaigns. It also articulates a rather circumscribed conceptualization of emotion and its place in crime-control culture as a primarily ‘reactive’ phenomenon. But crime discourses not only evoke negative emotions by providing a mechanism for channelling anger, fear, hostility, rage or grief, they also have the capacity to generate positive feelings toward others (e.g. solidarity, love, respect and trust) that can motivate alliances and lead to action on behalf of others (see Jasper, 1998). Still, rather than inquiring into the complex dynamics involved in the social construction of disorderly social space – as his commentary on situational strategies suggests – Garland relies on the explanatory purchase of elite-initiated discourses to consolidate citizen compliance with elite interests.
To avoid the determinism found in explanations of late modern crime control (Garland, 2001) or the new/neoliberal authoritarian state (Coleman, 2003a; Coleman and Sim, 2000), we have sought to elaborate on the complex dynamics involved in efforts to establish (or expand) public CCTV surveillance systems. While we recognize the valuable insights found in late modern or neoliberal conceptions of law and order politics, their generalizability is limited by a shared reliance on top-down explanations for elite responsibilization of the citizenry. As we have demonstrated, these processes are neither predicated exclusively on top-down interpellations initiated by elite partnerships – however much elite partners participate in, or support, promotional efforts – nor necessarily punitive in their nature. They involve, rather, a variety of interests originating from diverse social locations, and they are motivated by a number of material, ideological, emotional and discursive factors which signal wider concerns about risk, safety and social disorder in public space.

Notes

1. We would like to acknowledge the Financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Sean P. Hier and Josh Greenberg, Surveillance Practices and Social Problems, 2005–2008).

2. Williams (2003) notes that security cameras first appeared in Great Britain in the 1950s to monitor traffic and then expanded in the 1960s to monitor collective social unrest (i.e. crowd behaviour). By 1969, there were 14 police forces in Great Britain using 67 cameras. More widespread use of CCTV did not occur until the 1980s, primarily because of the prohibitive costs of the technology.

3. These figures do not include CCTV cameras in private (e.g. businesses) and quasi-public (e.g. transit, apartment buildings, schools, hospitals, etc.) spaces. It is estimated that there are currently more than 4.2 million surveillance cameras in Great Britain (Norris et al., 2004).

4. In a study for the California Research Bureau, Nieto (1997) identifies the presence of public video surveillance projects in the United States, Spain, Monaco, Russia, China, Italy, Iran and Iraq, Norris et al. (2004) identify programmes in Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, China, Japan, the Middle East, India and Pakistan. And Walby (2005a) and Hier (2004) have briefly examined open-street CCTV monitoring systems in Canada.

5. Representations of CCTV particularly, and surveillance generally, as entailing a ‘panoptic’ process are pervasive in popular culture, such as in literature (e.g. Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-four, Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale), Hollywood film (e.g. Conspiracy Theory, Enemy of the State and Minority Report) and television drama (e.g. 24, CSI and the Law and Order series).

6. Zygmunt Bauman, for example, maintains that consumer markets have replaced the state and civil society as the organizing system of individual and collective life. ‘In the present day society,’ Bauman writes, ‘consumer conduct (consumer freedom geared to consumer markets) moves steadily into the position of, simultaneously, the cognitive and moral focus of life, integrative bond of society, and the focus of systemic management’ (1988: 807). For Bauman, individuals are integrated into everyday social life through the seductive power of the market and processes of consumerism, and those who fail become ‘integrated’ into the consumer society (e.g.
the poor, underprivileged classes) will, in the last instance, be subject to repression by
technologies of panoptical control (see also Bauman, 1992).

7. It is important to acknowledge, too, that news organizations can primarily
frame issues independent of the definitional activities of other news sources, and that
media coverage of surveillance projects, and of other policy issues and events, pro-
vides an imprint of the social relations of power among those groups with an interest
or stake in their representation.

8. The London Police Service consulted the already operational systems in
Sudbury, Ontario (operational since 1996) and Glasgow, Scotland. This is significant
because most CCTV surveillance systems cite the purported successes of the Sudbury
system when promoting CCTV surveillance (London Police Services Questionnaire,2004).


10. Interview with Linda Eyre, Brockville City Council, 22 August 2005; interview
with Bob Huskinson, Brockville City Council, 19 and 25 August 2005.


12. Interviews with members of the Recorder and Times editorial department:
Barry Raison, editor, 28 November 2005; Doug Coward, city editor, 24 November


14. Police Chief King’s original plan was to have students from the local college
monitor the cameras.

15. Interview with Brockville Police Chief Barry King, 27 June 2005.

16. Interview with Brockville Police Chief Barry King, 27 June 2005; interview
with Brockville city councillor Linda Eyre, 22 August 2005; interview with Recorder

17. Interview with Brockville Police Chief Barry King; interview with Brockville
city councillor Linda Eyre, 22 August 2005.

18. See http://stopthecameras.tripod.com/ for information regarding the STCC.

19. Interview with Jane Burns, STCC, 6 October 2005.


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