



POSTCARD FROM LONDON

When Surveillance Cameras Talk

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Big Brother is not only *watching you*; in Barking and Dagenham, Big Brother *wants a word*. The disembodied voices of authority offering advice and warnings that now issue as if from thin air in the hardscrabble east London borough are, in fact, talking CCTV cameras — the latest high-tech weapon in the war on littering, graffiti, vandalism and other antisocial behavior. Sixteen of the borough's 84 surveillance cameras have been wired for sound, making London's first video monitoring network with a broadcasting capacity. A second borough, Southwark, will soon adopt the same system.

Both communities are among the 20 nationwide awarded \$50,000 grants by Britain's Home Office to test the cameras, following an initial trial run last year in the Northern city of Middlesbrough. The talking cameras are the latest advance in a country that's embraced video surveillance with an enthusiasm that would make Orwell shudder. Liberty, a civil liberties group, conservatively estimates there are 4.2 million CCTV cameras currently in operation in the UK, one for every 14 residents. Anyone living or working in London will likely be captured on camera 300 times a day, the group claims. Indeed, the government's information commissioner, Richard Thomas, has called Britain a "surveillance society" in danger of becoming overly reliant on tracking technologies.

But Glynis Rogers, Barking's head of community safety, counters that CCTV surveillance is popular with the public, and calls the talking cameras "a natural progression" of the technology. She's also dismissive of Big Brother parallels. The vocal cameras, she says, assure residents that the council is "actively managing the [borough's] open spaces ... so for us, it's actually far more open than a Big Brother scenario." Barking's cameras mostly transmit such prerecorded spiels as: "CCTV is in operation in this area and antisocial behavior will be reported to the police." Another

message reminds folks to keep an eye on their valuables. Eventually, the council wants to run contests to pick school children to voice some of the messages.

The system can also operate live, in real time. CCTV operators, keeping a vigilant eye on a bank of 39 monitors in their windowless office, can ad lib broadcasts, asking people, for instance, to pick up the litter they've just dropped, or warning them that their behavior's unacceptable.

Liberty is not impressed. While not wholly opposed to video surveillance, the group thinks it's been oversold as a crime-prevention method. "There's no evidence whatsoever that it actually deters crime," says Jen Corlew, the group's media director, and adding voices to the mix won't change that. "Gimmick' is the word we've been using to refer to it."

For the most part, the people on the streets of central Barking were taking the audio messages in stride — on a recent day, few even stopped to seek the source of the sound each time one was broadcast. Barking's a working-class area with a large population of senior citizens. Incomes are low; unemployment is high; and the shopping area is bereft of the chi-chi stores and expensive coffee bars so prevalent in central London. Officials brag that crime rates are falling faster in Barking than in all of London, but many residents remain afraid to venture out at night. Not surprising, then, those asked on the streets and in shops were quick to voice support for the cameras. Typical was Maureen Lovely, a 66-year-old retiree: "I know it's a bit like Big Brother is watching you, but it's a good way of making people be aware. Hopefully, it will make things cleaner and quieter."

Still, some question how effective the talking cameras will be on Friday and Saturday nights, when crowds can get rowdy. Hussain Scandari, a 19-year-old college student, doubted if troublemakers and people who have been drinking heavily will pay much heed to the audio admonitions. "They'll just do their own thing." Still, if they're arrested, they won't be able to say they weren't warned.