**We Need More Cameras, and We Need Them Now**

The case for surveillance.

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On Thursday afternoon, [the FBI released photos and video](http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2013/04/18/boston_bombing_photos_fbi_releases_photo_of_two_suspects_in_boston_bombing.html) of two persons of interest in the Boston Marathon bombing. According to FBI special agent Richard DesLauriers, authorities are looking for two men, whom he labeled Suspect No. 1 (who was wearing a dark hat) and Suspect No. 2 (who was wearing a white hat). DesLauriers also said that Suspect No. 2 was seen planting a device just before Monday’s explosions before heading west on Boylston Street.

What’s notable about the images the FBI released is how clear they are. Though DesLauriers did not indicate the source of the images, [the Boston Globe reported](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/10003931/Boston-Marathon-bombs-clear-images-of-two-suspects-to-be-released.html) earlier that authorities were focusing on video “from surveillance cameras on the same side of Boylston Street as the explosions.” If it turns out that the people in the FBI’s photos are the guys who did it, they shouldn’t be surprised that surveillance cameras turned out to be their undoing. Neither should you. We should see this potential break in the case as a sign of the virtues of video surveillance. More than that, we should think about how cameras could help prevent crimes, not just solve them once they’ve already happened.

Cities under the threat of terrorist attack should install networks of cameras to monitor everything that happens at vulnerable urban installations. Yes, you don’t like to be watched. Neither do I. But of all the measures we might consider to improve security in an age of terrorism, installing surveillance cameras everywhere may be the best choice. They’re cheap, less intrusive than many physical security systems, and—as will hopefully be the case with the Boston bombing—they can be extremely effective at solving crimes.

Surveillance cameras aren’t just the bane of hardcore civil libertarians. The idea of submitting to constant monitoring feels wrong, nearly un-American, to most of us. Cameras in the sky are the ultimate manifestation of Big Brother—a way for the government to watch you all the time, everywhere. In addition to normalizing surveillance—turning every public place into a venue for criminal investigation—there’s also the potential for abuse. Once a city is routinely surveilled, the government can turn every indiscretion into a criminal matter. You used to be able to speed down the street when you were in a hurry. Now, in many places around the world, a speed camera will record your behavior and send you a ticket in the mail. Combine cameras with facial-recognition technology and you’ve got a recipe for governmental intrusion. Did you just roll a joint or jaywalk or spray-paint a bus stop? Do you owe taxes or child support? Well, prepare to be investigated—if not hassled, fined, or arrested.

These aren’t trivial fears. The costs of ubiquitous surveillance are real. But these are not intractable problems. Such abuses and slippery-slope fears could be contained by regulations that circumscribe how the government can use footage obtained from security cameras. In general, we need to be thinking about ways to make cameras work for us, not reasons to abolish them. When you weigh cameras against other security measures, they emerge as the least costly and most effective choice. In the aftermath of 9/11, we’ve turned most public spaces into fortresses—now, it’s impossible for you to get into tall buildings, airports, many museums, concerts, and even public celebrations without being subjected to pat-downs and metal detectors. When combined with competent law enforcement, surveillance cameras are more effective, less intrusive, less psychologically draining, and much more pleasant than these alternatives. As several studies have found, a network of well-monitored cameras can help investigators solve crimes quickly, and there’s even evidence that cameras can help deter and predict criminal acts, too.

If the guys in the photos turn out to be the Boston bombers, it won’t be the first time we’ve caught terrorists with surveillance cameras. It happened in London, the world’s most-surveilled city, almost a decade ago. When a team of suicide bombers attacked the city’s transportation systems on July 7, 2005, officials [relied primarily on closed-circuit television cameras](http://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1065&context=fac_pubs) to identify the attackers. Thanks to CCTV cameras, the identities of the bombers and their co-conspirators were determined in a few days’ time.

Two weeks later,[another team of bombers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/21_July_2005_London_bombings%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) attempted to attack London’s subway and bus system. Their bombs failed. The suspects fled. But the [cops had them on camera](http://www.pressmon.com/cgi-bin/press_view.cgi?id=814436). Within a day, police had isolated images of the attackers and released pictures to the media. Tips from the public poured in—and within a week, the police had arrested the attackers and their accomplices. (During the course of the stakeout, the cops also [shot and killed an innocent man](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/629/629/7073125.stm).)

There’s ample evidence that CCTVs combat more routine crime. According to [a study by the Department of Justice’s Office of Community Oriented Policing Services](http://www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/412403-Evaluating-the-Use-of-Public-Surveillance-Cameras-for-Crime-Control-and-Prevention.pdf), when surveillance networks are installed and competently manned by trained personnel, they reduce many types of criminal activity by a significant margin, and they do so cost-effectively. After cameras were installed in downtown Baltimore in 2005, the study says, violent crime fell by 23 percent and all crime fell by 25 percent. In one area of Chicago, crime fell by 38 percent after CCTVs were installed. The study showed a smaller impact in other places—in Washington, D.C., for instance, researchers found that a surveillance system had no discernable impact on crime. But the reason for D.C.’s surveillance failure won’t please civil libertarians: Researchers argued that the cameras likely didn’t work because their use was too tightly regulated as a result of privacy fears. After getting input from the ACLU, D.C. instituted rules that severely limit who can look at the cameras and whom they can follow. The rules also prevent operators from saving surveillance footage routinely. In practice, the regulations mean that few people are monitoring D.C.’s cameras and responding to crimes that are caught on tape. The report suggests that if the rules were relaxed, the cameras might prove far more effective.

The next step in surveillance technology involves artificial intelligence. Several companies are working on software that monitors security-camera images in an effort to spot criminal activity before it happens. One company, BRS Labs, has built [technology for the San Francisco public transportation system](http://www.fastcompany.com/1839052/mass-transit-cameras-spot-bad-guys-no-human-judgment-required) that will monitor scenes and alert officials when it spots “unusual or abnormal behavior.” What’s that, exactly? According the [company’s proposal](http://mission.sfgov.org/OCA_BID_ATTACHMENTS/FA22544.pdf) and its other promotional material, the software looks for any statistically unusual occurrences. By monitoring a scene for a long time, it determines what’s “normal” for that environment. It then alerts officials when something strays from normalcy. For instance, as BRS’ president told [*the Daily last year*](http://www.thedaily.com/article/2012/12/13/121312-news-behavior-detection/), the software sent out an alert when it noticed a truck entering a San Francisco tunnel that’s supposed to be used only by subway trains. Other occurrences that might set the software on high alert include people who are loitering instead of getting about their business, people who are jumping turnstiles, and folks who drop a package and then walk away.

The best reason to welcome a government network of surveillance cameras is that we’re already being watched—just not systematically, in a way that aids law enforcement. Private security cameras dot every busy street, and people’s personal cameras are everywhere. It might have been valuable, at some point, for us to have a discussion about whether we wanted to go down the road of having cameras everywhere. But we missed that moment—instead, you and I and everyone we know went out and bought smartphones and began snapping photos incessantly. Nowadays, when anything big goes down, we all willingly cede our right to privacy—we all take it for granted that photos provide valuable insight into news events, and we flood the Web with pictures and clips of the scene of big news.

[Documents obtained by the ACLU of Massachusetts](http://www.privacysos.org/CCTV-Boston) show that the city of Boston does have security cameras in place. There are only around 55 law enforcement cameras monitoring the city, with an additional 92 in surrounding towns and about 600 in the subway system. (There are many more run by private entities.) This sounds like a lot, but compared to other cities, Boston’s system is small. New York’s security camera plan, dubbed the “Ring of Steel,” uses [3,000 cameras in Lower Manhattan alone](http://newyork.cbslocal.com/2011/07/29/lower-manhattan-ring-of-steel-to-have-3000-cameras-by-91111/); that plan is based on London’s own “Ring of Steel,” which includes as many as a half-million cameras.

Of course, Boston is far smaller than New York or London, but the problem isn’t just the number of cameras, it’s that Boston—like most other American cities—hasn’t put security cameras at the forefront of its security plan. Boston has no ring of steel. Neither does Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco, or Atlanta.

Cameras helped the FBI find persons of interest in the marathon bombing. But could they have done more? I can’t tell you if the marathon bombing would have been prevented if Boston had a larger network of cameras being monitored by software or human operators. It’s certainly possible that if the cops were watching the scene in real time from 100 different angles, they might have missed something. But at least they would have had a chance to see something. That’s better than staying in the dark.

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