

Duleek use of CCTV to fight crime based on flawed logic

Surveillance does little to deter evildoers and can often breach people's data rights

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Some of the 14 CCTV cameras that have been installed in Duleek. Their use raises questions of proportionality, effectiveness and legality. Photograph: Alan Betson

Last week the Co Meath village of Duleek was dubbed the CCTV capital of Ireland. A new system sees 14 cameras recording the village itself, all routes in and out, and also the neighbouring village of Donore.

How did a small rural area, with a population of approximately 5,000 people, end up with such an extensive system? The scheme was the result of a community initiative, and one of the main proponents, Garda Ray Andrews, portrayed it as a “fight back” against criminals who “saw Duleek as a soft target”.

This narrative of locals organising and standing up to outsiders is an appealing one, which it might seem churlish to question. But when examined more closely, the Duleek system raises questions of proportionality, effectiveness and legality.

Let's begin by looking at the extent of crime in Duleek. Does it require blanket surveillance? Advocates for the system described the village as having become "blighted by crime". In common with other parts of the country, Duleek did see an increase in some types of crime during the recession. The number of recorded burglaries, for example, spiked from 49 in 2006 to 91 in 2011. But those numbers are already falling – recorded burglaries in 2015 were already back to pre-recession levels at 46. This suggests that the response is driven more by the perceived threat of crime rather than the reality.

What about effectiveness? Does CCTV in public places deter crime? There is a considerable body of research indicating that it doesn't. With the exception of some specific targeted systems – such as in car parks – study after study have found no significant reduction when comparing levels of crime before and after installation. A few exceptions have found a small degree of crime displacement rather than reduction, with crimes simply moving to neighbouring streets. The leading UK research, looking at 14 schemes throughout England, found that "overall crime patterns lead one to the conclusion that CCTV was not very effective".

Low detection rate

If CCTV does not prevent crime, does it at least make it more likely that crimes will be solved and prosecuted? There is little research on this point, but an internal report from the Metropolitan Police in 2009 found that "for every 1,000 cameras in London, less than one crime is solved per year". Even the crimes most amenable to CCTV had a low detection rate – that same report found that less than 3 per cent of on-street muggings were solved using CCTV footage.

The indiscriminate nature of the Duleek scheme means that this type of surveillance is disproportionate to any particular need and most likely illegal. There is a direct precedent from the English town of Royston where a similar scheme – with cameras on every road into the town which logged car number plates on entry and exit – was found to breach data protection law. The UK Information Commissioner's Office ordered the local police force to discontinue the system, noting that "it is difficult to see why a small rural town . . . requires cameras monitoring all traffic in and out of the town 24 hours a day".

Indeed, the Duleek scheme is significantly more invasive than the Royston case – by recording video of all individuals, not merely car numberplates, and by using cameras which can be directed to target individuals. Experience elsewhere is that manually controlled security cameras have often been used for voyeurism, following attractive women and peeping in windows, and this problem is compounded by the fact that Irish law does not currently have a criminal offence to prosecute this type of abuse.

Entirely unproven

The Data Protection Commissioner has already contacted An Garda Síochána to discuss local CCTV systems, and it is likely that the Duleek scheme will have to be modified as a result. But the scheme also raises wider issues. Why has there been such public enthusiasm for a technology which is entirely unproven, at a time when crime is falling overall? Why is there a desire to spend money on shiny new systems instead of less glamorous but more effective responses such as improved street lighting?

Chief Supt Fergus Healy has said of the Duleek scheme that it will help people feel safe in their homes. This is most likely true – if nothing else, systems of this sort have a placebo effect. The Duleek scheme also has an obvious appeal for government. At €50,000 to install, it costs significantly less than adding an additional garda in the area.

More generally, the Belarusian technology writer Evgeny Morozov has identified a wider trend towards “technological solutionism” – a modern tendency to believe that complex social problems can be reduced to technological issues. The desire for ubiquitous cameras and the current Garda five-year modernisation plan which aims to use “face-in-the-crowd and shape-in-the-crowd biometrics” to track individuals on CCTV both fit into this category.

It seems that proponents have been seduced by the technology, without any clear argument for why the systems will be effective, much less legal.

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