

“Cameras Don’t Kill People”: Community-Based Organizations and the Expansion of Camera Systems in St. Louis, Missouri

Ph.D. Dissertation

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Abstract

Law enforcement agencies in the US are increasingly seeing the benefit of linking public and private camera systems to increase their surveillance capacity. While police use of private cameras for law enforcement purposes has become contentious in many policy, media, legal, and regulatory circles, discourse remains quite abstract, focusing largely on its ‘utopian’ and ‘dystopian’ possibilities. Drawing on interviews with leaders of community-based organizations (CBOs) in St. Louis, Missouri who have implemented cameras, this dissertation seeks to better understand the ‘private side’ of surveillance systems in public areas.

First, I explore what compels and motivates community-based organizations to implement cameras and how they negotiate public criticism and discord for installing them. Second, I explore how cameras installed by CBOs are used in partnership with the police. Third, I examine the ways in which these camera systems are connected to purposes beyond direct law enforcement. By examining these questions, the overarching goal of this dissertation is to understand why community organizations are contributing to the expansion of camera networks in public spaces and what this involvement could mean for the future of urban surveillance.

The findings from this dissertation show that community demands for cameras, ‘police-in-crisis’ discourses, and memetic pressures (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) are key factors driving the implementation of camera systems by CBOs. I find participants navigate discord in varied ways but can loosely be captured in two distinct approaches: some resist and counter any criticism while others seek to evade conflict and implement their systems with greater caution. Additionally, while many CBOs in the study try to use their camera systems to support local police, law enforcement officials are characterized as fairly absent partners. The results presented also suggest that cameras implemented by CBOs function as a form of electronic fortification with the goal of ‘keeping out’ those who might pose a threat. At times, however, CBO leaders fluctuated between using their cameras to exclude those who pose a ‘danger’ and reformulating these systems for more ‘welfarist’ and ‘caring’ purposes.