

## Surveillance Society

*We're a nation of watchers; the flipside of that is, meanwhile, we're also being watched*

By Ronnie Rittenberry Feb 01, 2011

Along with “It’s a Wonderful Life” and “Polar Express,” holiday viewing for me this year included video footage released mid- December by the King County (Wash.) Sheriff’s Office. The four-minute-or-so clip shows five teenage girls boarding a crowded Metro bus in Seattle and making their way to the back of the vehicle where they, without warning, begin attacking another teenage girl and her boyfriend, both of whom are just sitting there, minding their own business, as the video commences.

As it turns out, the girl under attack was 17 years old and three months pregnant at the time. You know this because her 19-year-old boyfriend, while having his pockets picked and receiving a flurry of punches and flying kicks to the head, apprises the attackers of her condition. The response from one of the assaulters, clearly audible on the video, is, “Nobody hit her in the stomach . . . hit her in the face!”

Which, as the video vividly shows, is exactly what happens.

It is a long four minutes. Watching it, you can’t help but notice the other passengers who, for the most part, just sit there and watch the assault happen.

Eventually, two or three snap out of their stupor and join the boyfriend in yelling for the driver to stop the bus, but until that point they resemble nothing so much as deer in headlights. No one even bothers to dial 911. It makes for eerie viewing and a sad counterpoint to Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey. It also forces you to consider how we’ve become a society of watchers . . . and, at the same time, a nation being perpetually watched.

### **Unblinking Eyes**

The footage for this particular bit of yuletide drama came from the lens of a lone surveillance camera installed at the back of King County Metro’s Route 358 bus, recording all -- including, indisputably, participants’ faces, down to the blood on the pregnant teenager’s cheek. Authorities were able to use the footage to identify and apprehend all five of the attackers.

According to King County Sheriff Sue Rahr, the Route 358 bus is one of nearly 400 Metro coaches currently equipped with such state-of-the-art video equipment. She said there is a more than 90 percent arrest rate for crimes captured on video and that, partly because of that, cameras will be added to another 250 buses over the next few years.

Rodell Notbohm, general manager of Apollo Video Technology, the Woodinville, Wash.-based company responsible for the camera installations aboard the Metro’s fleet, said the presence of such mobile video systems is definitely on the rise. He added that while the Route 358 bus was not equipped with the latest wireless technology, often the mere presence of a camera is enough to deter crime. This time it was not, even though the bus also had signs posted alerting passengers that video surveillance was in use. Typically, he said, Apollo puts anywhere from six to 16 cameras on a transit

vehicle -- and usually more than a dozen cameras per car on a train.

**Wi-Fi on the Rise** Notbohm noted that most of the recent federal funding for security on transit vehicles has included a clause requiring, at a minimum, live look-in capabilities.

“Essentially, what that means is the buses will generally have Wi-Fi access points onboard,” he said. When responders arrive, they’re able to access an onboard camera’s footage in real time, as it is happening, without actually getting on the vehicle, using an inboard laptop in their police cars or even an iPhone app. “They can see what’s happening in there, but they have to arrive first. That’s the baseline funding.”

More and more, though, municipalities and transit agencies are opting for systems with a cellular connection, and with those, authorities can be anywhere and dial in -- not just right there within the line of sight.

While video on transit vehicles is not new, it’s still not widespread. “I would say that if you go through all the transit vehicles in the United States, it’s a pretty small percentage of them that actually have video cameras onboard,” Notbohm said. “It’s still very customized to have equipment on a transit vehicle and survive in that environment, with the extreme wide ranges of temperature and power and so forth.

“I would say two years ago probably less than half of the vehicles that we put video systems on had any kind of wireless whatsoever, and now almost all of them have at least some form of wireless onboard that they can use to look in live and see what’s happening inside those vehicles. And just in the case of the last year, I’m seeing many, many more agencies going for the cellular technologies that give them always the ability to look in at any point and see what’s happening.”

### **The Moveable Lens**

Eventually, technology will make the presence of such real-time monitoring commonplace, and while that will mean more people will be watched more often, it also will mean -- hopefully -- fewer attacks like the one on Route 358. It will be a matter of ubiquitous surveillance in the name of safety and security. If that brings to mind George Orwell more than George Bailey, it shouldn’t, Notbohm said.

“Really, people don’t have an expectation of privacy on a transit vehicle,” he said. “If you ask any transit agency, that’s what they’re going to tell you -- that, ‘Well, you’re on a transit bus; this is not a private place; you have no real expectation of privacy in that location.’

“On the other hand, what you see at transit agencies that have video systems onboard some percentage of their fleet is that the drivers want to be driving the vehicles with the cameras because it protects them much more than it monitors their behavior.”

### **About the Author**

**Ronnie Rittenberry is print managing editor for Security Products and Occupational Health and Safety magazines.**

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