[Big Op-Ed: Shifting Opinions On Surveillance Cameras](https://www.npr.org/2013/04/22/178436355/big-op-ed-shifting-opinions-on-surveillance-cameras)

NEAL CONAN, HOST:

This is TALK OF THE NATION. I'm Neal Conan in Washington. And now it's time for the Opinion Page. Investigators in the Boston Marathon bombings used all kinds of images to identify the suspects in Boston: pictures from cell phones, portable video recorders and from TV. But the most useful came from surveillance cameras placed to monitor public places like the entrance to the Lord and Taylor department store and Forum Restaurant.

There are cameras operated by the police in and around Boston: an estimated 150 outside; another 400 in the subway. Compare that to about 3,000 in the Financial District of New York City alone and 400,000 in London. Has the role of surveillance video in the Boston investigation changed your mind about cameras in public spaces? Give us a call, 800-989-8255. Email us, talk@npr.org. You can also join the conversation on our website. That's at npr.org. Click on TALK OF THE NATION.

Later in the program, we'll mark Earth Day and then go back to Boston to talk with Globe columnist Dan Shaughnessy. But right now, looking at the surveillance camera controversy with fresh eyes. We'll also be reading from some op-eds that have been published on the subject, including from Farhad Manjoo, writing on Slate.com, who wrote: 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 - he was writing before the arrests on Friday - they can be extremely effective at solving crimes.

He continues later in his piece: We need 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. 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, as well.

And this is another piece, this from Salon.com from Falguni A. Sheth and Robert Prasch, and they are respectively a professor of philosophy and political theory at Hampshire College, and Robert Prasch is a professor of economics at Middlebury College.

There was nearly no element of the recently reinforced surveillance state that contributed to the capture or killing these two suspects. As an example, they wrote, let's assume every detail of the attack is the same except that it occurred in 1977, to pick a random date prior to the ubiquitous counterterrorism surveillance state.

If the bad guys had put together such a plan in 1977, would events have unfolded any differently? Would there have been a lot of photography at the finish line of such a prominent public event? Yes, although in the pre-digital age, it would have taken a little longer to gather and sort through the pictures. Hence, this aspect of this past week's outcome can't be describe - ascribed, rather, to the massive expenditures and federalization of homeland security, but rather to a change in consumer electronics.

Would the initial shootout in Watertown, the escape of one of the brothers, and the eventual spotting of blood on the side of a boat and the calling in of that observation have unfolded in more or less the same way in 1977? Probably, they write. So what in fact did change? We now have a war on terror that permeates every public news event and action. The events of the past week in Boston do not vindicate the rise of the Homeland Security bureaucracy and certainly do not vindicate the stripping of our civil liberties, the shutting down of a major city or the instantiation of a police state. They certainly affirm the future as it was perceived by Orwell.

And let's see if we can get a caller in on the conversation. Let's start with Rufus(ph) and Rufus on the line with us from Orlando.

RUFUS: Yes, how are you doing?

CONAN: Good, thanks.

RUFUS: I - just real quickly, I am in support of the cameras. I've long been in support of the cameras. If you've ever traveled to Europe or other places outside of the United States, these things have been accepted as part of the culture and the environment.

And, you know, we like to talk about preserving our way of life, our quality of life. Well, to me, with liberty there are some sacrifices that have to be made. And I trust that these cameras will be used in a manner that's consistent with the integrity and the preservation of life. And I'm quite glad that we are now getting to that point.

CONAN: There has been no tool of police surveillance or observation, for example wiretapping, that has not been abused at some point or another.

RUFUS: Yeah, and I'm quite aware of that. I'm a former - actually a former police officer in the state of Maryland, and I do know that police, as well as other sworn officials, will abuse power. I would hope that they are the exceptions and not the rule, and - but I do think that it will take a consistent or healthy check and balance and challenge to these measures, but I do support them.

CONAN: All right, thanks very much for the phone call. Here's an email that we have, this is from Richard(ph): I have not changed my mind on please using - or police using surveillance cameras. If police want to use a surveillance camera, they need to get a specific warrant for the records of said surveillance camera. Even if said surveillance camera is run by the police department, that camera still needs to have a warrant requesting the record from said camera for use in any particular case.

For something that happened in Boston, I don't see any judge having an issue issuing a warrant in order to acquire the records from the surveillance cameras that were found in the vicinity in which the bombs exploded. There is freedom, and there is totalitarianism. We still live in a free country.

I'm not quite sure that Richard is correct in his presumptions about the necessity for a warrant to acquire the use of those images. I believe the Supreme Court has ruled in the past that in a public space, if your image is captured on a surveillance video operated by the police or anybody else, you have no expectation of privacy.

Let's see if we can go next to Karen(ph), Karen on the line with us from Mesa, Arizona.

KAREN: Hi, I'd just like to say that I'm not in support of the cameras. I think that it's part of living in a free society that we take those risks, and I think it's important that the community be involved in helping to, you know, kind of intercede or monitor or kind of be a part of keeping us safe. And I think it's just when you start to build on things like what you're - and even though I know it's successful there in some levels, I think it just opens the door.

And I think it could lead to other things and more monitoring and more monitoring when it won't prevent the acts from happening. It may allow us to catch the people, but it doesn't necessarily mean they're going to prevent it, and it doesn't mean that the criminals become more sophisticated with each application of protection we try to bring to the table. So it's not going to prevent it. So I'll take...

CONAN: I just wanted to ask a question. Some people, there has been a suggestion that there may have been further acts planned. If these people had not been picked up by that surveillance camera in Boston, another bomb goes off?

KAREN: Well, I think, though, as a society, with our technology and with all the social networks, we kind of are already doing what the cameras would do, in a sense, and that is, like I said, would track the person but not necessarily prevent it. Just because there's a camera doesn't mean that it would prevent it. And I just think that, like I said, it opens the door.

But there's good and bad about everything, you know what I mean? No system is perfect, and no system is, you know, unusable. I mean, it has its strengths, but I just think there are better ways and other ways, and it's not the common for these things to happen, although it seems like it is right now. The fact is is that it's not, and I think it does start to affect the term free society.

CONAN: Thanks very much for the call.

KAREN: Bye-bye.

CONAN: Here's exactly on that point a comment from Gordon Crovitz in an op-ed published in the Wall Street Journal. The cameras are getting smarter. New software goes beyond passive recording to alerting law enforcement about suspicious activity in real time. Video analytics enable what's called activity forecasting. By applying artificial intelligence to video, these services issue alerts of what researchers call anomalous behavior, such as when cameras detect people leaving bags behind in public places.

The technology from these companies is still new. It might not have been good enough to have identified the bags left behind by the terrorists in time to disarm the Boston bombs. As these systems improve, however, there will be a growing gap between the cities that make full use of surveillance technologies and those that don't.

A little bit later in his piece, Mr. Crovitz goes on to say: In 2009, the ACLU issued a news release praising the City Council of Cambridge, Massachusetts, for voting down surveillance cameras, quote, in the first move of this kind in the state and perhaps the nation, Cambridge had installed but not activated eight cameras.

The Tsarnaev brothers lived in Cambridge and allegedly murdered Sean Collier, a campus policeman at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, there. Since cameras were instrumental in identifying the suspects, the ACLU has a lot to answer for. So does the Cambridge City Council, which has still not turned its cameras on.

Let's get another caller in and go to Calvin(ph), Calvin's on the line with us from Plymouth.

CALVIN: Hello.

CONAN: Hi, you're on the air, go ahead.

CALVIN: Thank you. My opinion on the cameras is they are useful. They're very useful in public places and the monitoring of public places and can help detect dangerous behavior without bias which can sometimes be exhibited by police officers unconsciously or consciously. I do think that there is a line, and it's an important line which we can't cross. And that is if you attempt to install cameras for the monitoring of public businesses or public domiciles, then you run into some - I think that's where the major gray area is.

CONAN: What do you mean by public domiciles?

CALVIN: Well, a house or - I suppose monitoring of residential areas is a bit too Orwellian for this time. I think that there would be a significant push against that. But at the same time, I think that monitoring a private business who doesn't necessarily wants to be monitored I think that there is - and you mentioned before the Supreme Court decisions about expectations of privacy in public areas. I think that we need to make sure that we have clearly defined areas where there is an expectation of privacy, and that cameras should not be in those areas.

CONAN: And where - would that include parks? Would that include public squares?

CALVIN: Public squares and parks I think those are reasonable and excellent places to put security cameras. But I think that if someone owns an area, if they own a piece of land or if they own a business inside of a city, then if they don't want to be monitored, then that's their right.

CONAN: And I believe that would be in accordance with the Supreme Court ruling as it stands now, though...

(LAUGHTER)

CONAN: ...I'm no constitutional law expert.

CALVIN: Yes. I tend to follow the Supreme Court a lot. I find their decisions interesting, but I'm no lawyer either.

CONAN: All right. Well, thanks very much for the call. Appreciate it.

CALVIN: All right. No problem.

CONAN: Here's an email that we have from Andrea - Andrea, excuse me - in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania: The use of cameras in this case has significantly complicated my thoughts on surveillance. I worry a great deal about ways those cameras can be used to increase the government's intrusion into our lives. So the issue, for me, comes down to not the use of cameras per se but to who gets to use them for what purposes and how do we keep from sliding down the slippery slope.

And this one from John in North Carolina: I'm deeply disturbed by the home searches and the de facto institution of martial law not only in Boston but in recent cases like the Christopher Dorner manhunt. I feel like Americans are surrendering more and more of their liberties to a more and more aggressive law enforcement presence. That said, I surprisingly have no problems whatsoever with more surveillance cameras in public places. There is no reasonable expectation of privacy there, and those cameras may provide valuable evidence in cases such like this, or even serve as a deterrent.

On The Opinion Page this week, we're talking about the use of surveillance cameras in public places, obviously critical to the situation in Boston. If you'd like to see links to the pieces we're reading, the op-ed pieces, you can go to our website at npr.org and click on TALK OF THE NATION. And this is TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News. And let's go next to Ed. Ed on the line with us from Berkeley.

ED: Hi. I'm definitely for using cameras. I own a business in Telegraph Avenue in the city of Berkeley. And as many parts of the country, we have problems. So my cameras shoot all across a block long. About two years ago, there was actual shooting right about half a block from our store, and our cameras could see the victim and the people who shot him walking together. And then later on, we'll see the two who killed the poor man running the other way, and the police came to our shop knowing that we keep videos of all that.

And they caught the two people that did commit the murder. We also caught a stabbing. And I'll tell you what. No matter what, we'll do anything we can, all of us to have prevented this awful incident in Boston. And, you know, privacy - what people are afraid of - this is - really, I kind of disagree with the ACLU about camera business. We live in a very difficult society right now. If we can solve problems, if we can make the neighborhood safer - in fact, one reason our shop was never robbed because we have a lot of cameras inside the business as well.

So people are less likely to come in with a gun or, you know, any - try or causing problems because they know that they'll be on cameras, not only once they're inside the business but even as they're walking in the business a block away. That's all I have to say. Thank you.

CONAN: All right. Thanks very much. I'm sorry that you had to go through that experience.

ED: Yes. Thank you very much. Thank you.

CONAN: Here's an email we have from Mark(ph) in Clayton, North Carolina: Security cameras are a great resource for reference when a tragedy like the Boston Marathon bombing occurred, but the concern is when they become surveillance cameras for someone to monitor our lives. Mark(ph), in Knoxville, writes: It's a criminal defense. I'm a criminal defense lawyer. When it comes to cameras on the street corner, I think we should first get them into all police vehicles.

In our local police, we find that a drug unit vehicle doesn't have - don't have video. The FBI in 2013 never records questioning of suspects. Trust goes both ways. They don't trust us to see and hear what they are up to. Why should we? And let's see if we get another caller in on the conversation. Let's go to Bob. Bob is on the line with us from Sterling, Michigan.

BOB: Yeah. Hi.

CONAN: Go ahead.

BOB: I never understood where there's an expectation of privacy on a public street, any public street. If you're on the public street, you're in the public. So as far as cameras go, what would prevent anyone from putting them up?

CONAN: Well, get the situation in London, for example, of hundreds of thousands of cameras around the city and are people fearing the, well, you're being watched all the time.

BOB: You're on a public street. How would that be different than if you pay some police officer just to follow someone around all the time? But I'm stuck with - if you're out in public, you put yourself out in public. You don't have an expectation of privacy in the public, just like you don't have one in an airport. It's the same type of thing.

CONAN: OK. Thanks very much for the phone call.

BOB: Okey-doke.

CONAN: And this is an email we have from Greg(ph) in Novato, California: Cleaning up our small suburban play park on Saturday, quick consensus was reached by local residents that surveillance cameras' time has arrived. We face petty theft, worrisome contact of kids playing on the block with unknown men slowing down cars to talk with them. For all of us, the quick connection was made between cameras and catching a perpetrator. Boston was a watershed moment.

And this - couple more emails. This from Jean(ph) in Chapel Hill: I've definitely changed my thoughts on the subject. I think the more cameras around, the better. Really, if you're minding your own business and have nothing to hide, this should be a good thing. Also, I think it would deter people from doing these horrible things. And this from Jeremy in Cincinnati: I'm very comfortable with the system we have now. Cameras in public places are privately owned, and the data either voluntarily shared or subject to warrant, subpoena, I would not advocate duplication of privately owned surveillance by government. Subways, yes, the police have cameras, but it is publicly owned.

Anyway, thanks to everybody who called and wrote, and we're sorry we didn't have time to get to everybody's comments. When we come back, Earth Day and how much it's changed since the first one, all the way back in 1970. Stay with us. I'm Neal Conan. You're listening to TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

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